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CASTAWAY.

A Novel.

By EDMUND YATES,

AUTHOR OF 'NOBODY'S FORTUNE,' 'DR. WAINWRIGHT'S PATIENT,' 'WRECKED IN PORT,' ETC.

'Like some forlorn and desperate castaway.' *Tit. And.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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CASTAWAY.

Book the Third.

CHAPTER I.

THE CIPHER TELEGRAM.

Sir Geoffry was walking in the grounds at Wheatcroft when a fly with Madge and her luggage drove up to the little lodge gates. The old General looked up, and recognising the visitor, walked to the door of the vehicle and courteously assisted her to alight.

'If you are not tired, Mrs. Pickering,' said he, 'you may as well let the man go on with your luggage to the house, while we stroll up there quietly together; it is a beau-

tiful evening, and there are one or two things which I have to say to you.'

He spoke to her with doffed hat, and holding her hand in his, treating her as he always treated her, as a lady and his equal in rank.

Looking at him with the evening sunlight falling full upon his face, Madge was much struck with the alteration in Sir Geoffry's appearance. His cheeks, never very full, were now quite hollow; his lips seemed more tightly set and more rigid even than usual, and there was a strange, strained, seared look round his eyes.

'I shall be delighted to walk with you,' said Madge, 'for I am cramped with long railway travelling. Has anything happened, Sir Geoffry, during my absence?' she asked suddenly.

'What could have happened?' he replied, turning to her abruptly. 'What makes you inquire?'

'Something in your appearance,' she said; 'a look of care and anxiety, mingled with a

certain amount of rebellious opposition, which I have never before perceived in you. You are not annoyed at my frankness, I hope?'

'On the contrary, I am gratified at the interest you are good enough to take in me; and more than ever impressed with the quickness of your perception.'

'Then something has happened?'

'Exactly, something sufficiently disagreeable. I will tell you about it when you have had some refreshment; you must be faint after your long journey.'

'I would very much sooner hear it now. I had some luncheon at Salisbury; besides, being kept in suspense as to the cause of your annoyance, would quite deprive me of any appetite.'

'Well, then, I will tell you, and do my best to make my story as short as possible. You have never asked me any particulars of my early history, Mrs. Pickering, nor have I volunteered them to you; but you know that I have a son—I say you know it, because on two or three occasions when I have expressed

myself as to the ingratitude of children, I have seen your eyes fixed upon me with that quiet, searching gaze which is peculiar to yourself, and which showed me you guessed I was not speaking on a subject of which I had not had experience. I have a son—'

'Gerald! I—I mean George.'

'I beg your pardon,' exclaimed the old gentleman, with surprise, 'your information is more complete than I imagined. You seem to know my son's name?'

'From seeing it subscribed to a few boyish letters, and one or two water-colour sketches, which were amongst the papers you bade me empty from the bullock-trunk, and destroy,' said Madge.

'Quite right, I recollect them,' said the General. 'Yes, I have one son, George Heriot. His mother died when he was a lad. Ten years before her death I separated from her, believing her to have been guilty of an intrigue with a man whom I shot; the boy lived with her during her lifetime, but on my return to England I intended to make him my

companion and my heir, when by the commission of what I considered one of the worst of all crimes, an act of cowardice, he forfeited all claim upon my affection. I forbade him my house, telling him at the same time—not maliciously, but as an incidental portion of our quarrel with which I need not trouble you—the story of his mother's disgrace. The lad declared I had been befooled by my own jealousy and temper, and swore that he would never rest until he had convinced me of my error, and cleared his mother's name.'

'That was good and brave!' said Madge. 'A lad who could undertake such a championship and in such a spirit could be no coward.'

'You think so,' said Sir Geoffry, looking sharply at her.

'I am sure of it!' said Madge. 'Ask yourself, Sir Geoffry; what does your own heart tell you?'

'My heart tells me what it told me at the time I discovered my wife's intrigue; that thoroughly well informed as I was of her guilt, I acted rightly in separating myself

from her and killing her seducer. When George Heriot raved before me, my heart told me that his conduct was mere boyish bravado and unfilial insolence. When he came here yesterday—'

'Did he come here yesterday? Was Gerald —George here yesterday?'

'He was; and when he stood there boasting that he had succeeded in what he had undertaken, and that he had proofs of his mother's innocence, my heart told me that it was a lie; and that he had returned with some trumped-up tale to endeavour to reinstate himself in my favour.'

The General was very hot and very much flushed when he came to a conclusion. He looked towards his companion, as though expecting her to speak; but finding she did not do so, he said, after a pause:

'You are silent, Mrs. Pickering!'

'Do you wish me to speak, Sir Geoffry?'

He paused again, and, apparently after some slight internal struggle, he said:

'I do, though if I guess rightly, what you

have to say will not be quite consonant with my feelings, not quite agreeable for me to hear. Nevertheless, say what you have to say, and I will listen to you: there is no other person in the world from whom I could take as much.'

This last sentence was only half heard by Madge. She was revolving in her mind whether she should confess to Sir Geoffry her acquaintance with Gerald, and the important part which she had played in the drama of the boy's life. Her first idea was to confess all; but when she recollected the old General's infirmity of temper, she thought that such an admission would lead him to look upon her in the light of a partisan, and thus irretrievably weaken her advocacy.

'I had no right to speak until requested by you to do so,' she said; 'and as you have rightly divined that I do not hold with your views in the matter, I would willingly have held my peace. Bidden to speak, I tell you frankly, Sir Geoffry, that I think you have been wrong from first to last. Of course the

whole affair, the separation from your wife, the disinheriting of your son, all hangs upon the one question of whether Mrs. Heriot were innocent or guilty. You say that you convinced yourself before the fulfilment of your revenge, but your son declares that he has obtained proofs of his mother's innocence. You are hasty, Sir Geoffry, apt to jump at conclusions without due deliberation, impatient of contradiction, and from what I know of your son, or rather I mean of course from what I have heard, and from what I gather from your account of him, he would not, I imagine, be likely to come forward without ample grounds for his assertion.'

The General had been pacing slowly by Madge's side during this colloquy, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent thoughtfully forward. As she progressed his face grew dark and stern, and when she paused he said:

'He would come forward for the sake of getting into my good graces and reinstating himself in his position in this house.'

'If he had that object in view, would he not have served his purpose better by pretending that he had discovered the truth of your story, pleading his mistake, and throwing himself on your mercy?'

'He is starved out and forced to capitulate; he is at the end of his resources, and so comes with the best story he can to make terms.'

'The length of time that has elapsed between his enforced departure from his home and his attempted return to it, impresses me decidedly in his favour,' said Madge. 'During the greater portion of this time he has doubtless been occupied in making the research which he says has terminated so favourably; and as for his having come to the end of his resources, I ask you, Sir Geoffry, whether it is likely that a young man who has maintained himself, whether honestly or dishonestly, well or ill, we know not, but still who has maintained himself for such a length of time, is likely to be at his wits' end in the very flower of his youth?'

'You think then I ought to have listened to him?'

'Unquestionably, for your own sake. If he had produced the proofs which he stated himself to possess, the remorse which you must have felt would have been tempered by the thought that you had acted in good faith, and by the recovery and reinstatement of your discarded son. If he had not those proofs, or they were insufficient to convince you, you would have had the satisfaction of knowing that you had been right throughout. At present—'

'At present I have only lost my temper, and made a fool of myself. That is, I suppose, what you would say,' said the General, looking up rather ruefully at his companion. 'So I did, raised the whole house, and told Riley to put the boy out. But what on earth did you go away for, Mrs. Pickering? If you had been at home this would not have happened.'

'It will not be difficult to remedy it yet, Sir Geoffry,' said Madge, with a quiet smile.

'You must write to him, and tell him to come here.'

'Write to him!' cried the General. 'I have not the least notion where he lives.'

'I daresay we can manage to find out,' said Madge.

'It is my belief you could manage to do anything you wished,' said the General. 'However, we will talk this matter over farther; and there is another subject of great importance which I want to discuss with you later on. Now let us go in to dinner.'

The tone of his voice showed that his heart was softened, and Madge was inexpressibly gratified at the idea that she, of whom Gerald had once been so fond, and who, as he thought, had treated him so badly, might become the means of his reinstatement in his father's house, and in his proper position in society.

The subject was not alluded to by either Sir Geoffry or Madge during the rest of that evening. The short conversation with his housekeeper during their walk in the grounds

had afforded the old General sufficient matter for reflection, and he sat buried in thought, dispensing with the reading of the newspaper, which he had missed so much during Madge's absence, and which he had intended to resume on her return. Madge herself was thoroughly tired out, and at a very early hour the little household was at rest.

The next morning brought Mr. Drage, who came up brimming over with news of the church congress, and intending to demolish Sir Geoffry in certain theological questions over which they were at issue, by cunningly devised arguments which had been used in the course of the clerical debate. But finding Mrs. Pickering had returned, and that the General was engaged out of doors, Mr. Drage availed himself of the opportunity to make his way to the housekeeper's room. There he found Madge, and after a few warm greetings on both sides, received from her a full account of her memorable visit to Sandown.

Mr. Drage listened with the deepest in-

terest. Impressed as she was with the gravity of the crime about to be committed, and its probable consequences to herself and the wretched woman who was about to become a participator in it, Madge could scarcely avoid being amused, as she watched the various changes which played over Mr. Drage's face during the recital of the story. That such a crime as bigamy had been contemplated was horrifying to the simple country clergyman, whose experience of law-breaking was derived from occasional attendance at the magistrates' meetings, where poaching and affiliation cases were the only troubles to the bench. But that a woman could be found who not merely did not shrink from the man who had endeavoured to entrap her into an illegal alliance, but actually announced her intention of fulfilling the contract and defying the world, was entirely beyond Mr. Drage's comprehension.

'And now you have heard all, and are in full possession of each circumstance of the

case as it now stands, what do you recommend should be done?' asked Madge.

'I confess,' said the Rector, with a very blank and perplexed look, 'that I am quite unable to advise you. I have never come across so determined a character as Mr. Vane appears to be; and this woman seems, from what you say, to be a perfect match for him. It is, of course, most horrible to have to sit by and witness an open infraction of the law, but we have at least the satisfaction of knowing that we have done our best to prevent it, even though the warning was not attended to.'

'As you say, we have done our best, and there it must end. I am heartily sick of the trouble and vexation it has caused me. If there had remained in me one lingering spark of affection for my husband, it would have been extinguished by this last and greatest insult. My pride tells me that I have already proceeded too far in this matter, and that when he hears what I have done, as he will hear, sooner or later, he will ascribe my ac-

tions to my continued attachment to him, and my unwillingness to see him taken by another woman.'

'Your pride may teach you that, but I have been reflecting as you spoke,' said Mr. Drage, 'and my conscience teaches me that we should not suffer this sin to be committed without one farther attempt to prevent it. You have seen Mrs. Bendixen, and she has refused to listen to you. I will go to London and search for Mr. Vane; he is a man of the world, and will more readily comprehend the difficulties which beset him, and the danger in which they are liable to result.'

'He is a desperate man,' said Madge, 'and one who would flinch from nothing where his interests were involved or his safety at stake. I should dread any meeting between you.'

'I am grateful for your interest in me,' said the Rector, with the hectic flush rising in his cheek, 'but I do not fear much for myself; and even were he to kill me—'

'I will not have you talk in that manner,'

said Madge, laying her hand lightly on his arm, and looking up earnestly into his face.

The Reverend Onesiphorus Drage had for some months past told himself that he had conquered his wild absorbing love for Mrs. Pickering, and that he only regarded her as a sister. There are so many of us who on certain subjects are frank and loyal to all others, and eminently deceitful to ourselves.

When the Rector left Mrs. Pickering's presence, he made his way to Sir Geoffry, whom he found still engaged in colloquy with the gardener. The old General was very pleased to see his clerical friend, shook him warmly by the hand, and promptly declined to enter into any of the church-congress questions or arguments which Mr. Drage had eagerly submitted to him, alleging that he had business of more pressing importance, on which the Rector's advice was required.

Up and down the carriage sweep in front of the house walked the two gentlemen for more than an hour; the subject of their con-

versation being the same as that which had occupied the General and Mrs. Pickering on the previous evening. Even at greater length than he had spoken to his housekeeper, Sir Geoffry explained to his friend the story of his earlier life, the separation from his wife, the duel with Mr. Yeldham, the interview with Gerald when he bade the boy renounce his name and his position, and the recent interview when he ordered Riley to turn him from the door. If he had any doubt of the feelings with which this narrative would have been received, the behaviour of his companion would have soon settled his mind. Mr. Drage listened silently to all, from the commencement of the story until the end. He never made the slightest verbal interruption ; but as Sir Geoffry proceeded, the Rector's head sunk upon his breast, and his hands, which had been clasped behind him, at last formed a refuge wherein his agitated face was hidden.

When the story came to an end, there was a long pause, broken by Sir Geoffry's saying :

'There is not much need to ask your opinion of my conduct in this matter; I see plainly that you are of the same mind as Mrs. Pickering, and consider that I have acted wrongly.'

'I do,' said Mr. Drage, raising his head, 'most wrongly, and unlike a parent, unlike a Christian, unlike a gentleman!'

'Sir!' cried the old General, stopping short in his walk, and glaring fiercely at his friend.

'I repeat what I said, Sir Geoffry Heriot, and defy you to disprove my words. Was it like a gentleman to watch and spy upon the actions of your wife and her partner in the ball-room; was it like a Christian to shoot down this man upon the mere supposition of his guilt?'

'Shoot him down, sir?—he had his chance,' cried the General.

'His chance!' echoed the Rector severely. 'What chance had a dilettante poet, painter, musician, what not, a lounger in drawing-rooms and boudoirs, who probably never had

a pistol in his hands in his life? What chance had he against you, a trained man of arms? Was it like a father for you to condemn this lad for keeping the oath which he had sworn to keep at his dying mother's bedside; to hunt him from your house when he came with his long-sought proofs of that mother's innocence?'

'You are a hard hitter, sir,' said Sir Geoffry, eyeing him sternly. 'You don't spare your adversaries!'

'Not when I think that there is a chance of rousing in them a spirit of remorse, or prompting them to actions of atonement.'

'Pardon me one moment,' said Sir Geoffry. 'Before we talk of remorse and atonement, I should point out to you that I am not the only one to blame in this question. I am hot-tempered, I allow it. Nature and the life I have led settled that for me; but this boy is as hot tempered as I am, and has an insolent way with him, which is in the highest degree provoking. However, we have talked enough on my family matters for the

present. Let us go in and see what Mrs. Pickering has provided for luncheon.'

The Rector knew his friend's peculiarities too well to attempt to renew the conversation at that time, and silently followed him into the house.

Before he went away the Rector found an opportunity of telling Mrs. Pickering the subject of the conversation he had had with Sir Geoffry, and spoke earnestly about its unsatisfactory termination.

Mr. Drage imagined from Sir Geoffry's tone, and from the abrupt manner in which he had brought the discussion to a close, that he was still highly incensed against his son; but Madge was much more sanguine on being able to bring Gerald back to his proper place in his father's heart. She knew that, however harsh and curt the General's manner might be to Mr. Drage, or to any other of his friends, she had a mollifying power over him, which, duly exercised, never failed to soothe him in his most irrational moments. She did not say this to the Rector, with whom she simply

condoled, but she felt tolerably certain that the day would not pass over without the subject being again broached to her by the General.

She was wrong. In the afternoon she received a summons to the library, and found Sir Geoffry awaiting her.

'I will not trouble you to commence reading just now, Mrs. Pickering,' said he, as he saw Madge opening the newspapers which had just arrived from London. 'I want to talk to you upon a matter of some importance, not quite in your line perhaps, but one in which your strong common sense cannot fail to advise me well and usefully. You have heard me mention my friend Irving?'

'Mr. Irving, of Coombe Park?'

'The same; I have told you of my long friendship with him, and of his determination made long ago, and abided by ever since, to enter into no speculations which I do not approve of. Strange to think that a man of a City position and financial knowledge should choose to be governed in his investments by

an old Indian officer, who knows little of money matters, and has never been on the Stock Exchange in his life! However, Irving is a Scotchman, and a great believer in luck; and as the first dabble on which I advised him turned out a lucky hit, he has relied upon me ever since, and has not done badly on the whole.'

'Surely that is a mild way of putting it,' said Madge. 'I think I have heard you say that Mr. Irving is one of the richest men in England?'

'So he is; and that is so well known that the mere advertisement of his name is a mine of wealth to any affair with which he may happen to be connected, such confidence does it inspire. Rich as he is, though, he still likes making the money, still takes a pleasure in adding to his heap, *crescit amor nummi*—what was it we used to say at school? Irving has been speculating very little lately; indeed, I began to fancy that he had given it up altogether. But of late I have had several letters from him, each increasing in warmth

and keenness about a certain mining company called the Terra del Fuegos, in which he is half persuaded to embark.'

'The Terra del Fuegos?' repeated Madge.

'That is the name. Surely, Mrs. Pickering,' said the old General jocularly, 'you are not a shareholder in that promising undertaking?'

'No,' said she, 'and yet the name seems to be familiar to me. Where can I have heard it?'

'Most probably it has caught your eye when you have been kindly reading over to me the prices of stocks and shares, and, being an odd name, has remained on your memory. However, Irving, though more predisposed in favour of this concern than of anything else which I can remember for many years, has abided by his old practice of referring to me for his final decision. I have read through all the printed documents connected with the undertaking, which in themselves are eminently satisfactory; but I require a little farther information on certain points, and wrote

so to Irving. He referred my letter to the company, who must consider his cohesion to their undertaking of great importance, as they proposed to send down two of their body, the chairman and the general manager, to explain matters to me.'

'The general manager!' cried Madge.

'And the chairman,' said the General. 'I forget their names, but I have them somewhere in the printed papers. These gentlemen will be down here to-morrow or the day after. Of course they will stay in the house, and I will ask you to be good enough to make preparations for their reception.'

Madge took the first opportunity to escape from the library, and seek the solitude of her own room, while Sir Geoffry was prosing on the mention of the general manager, and gave her the clue to the train of thought which the name of Terra del Fuegos had started. Philip Vane was the general manager to the Terra del Fuegos. She recollected Mr. Drage having obtained that information from his father's clerk in the City. And he was coming there

to Wheatcroft! He must not see her there. She must find some pretext for absenting herself during his stay. Could this visit to Wheatcroft have any connection with the telegram which had summoned him from Sandown, and which, as she believed, was the original of that of which Rose had forwarded to her the copy? What connection could there be between the two events she could not tell, but that there was a link between them she firmly believed.

She took the paper from the pocket of the dress which she had worn while travelling, and spread it out before her. She pored over it for an hour, puzzling her brain in endeavouring to assort and re-adjust the jumbled mass of letters before her. It was of no use, she would give it up for the present, her head might be clearer another time perhaps. She opened her desk, intending to lock the paper away in it, when suddenly she started and uttered a loud cry of joy. From the small leather note-case at the bottom of the desk, one of the few relics of Philip Vane which she

possessed, she drew a long strip of paper, with a column of letters in consecutive order on either side inscribed in the following manner:

A—F
B—R
C—M
D—B

and so on. This column was headed 'Writing.' Under the other, headed 'Reading,' these letters were reversed.

'My memory serves me well,' said Madge, with delight, 'and I am repaid for having kept this note-case and its contents so long. This is a key to some cipher which Philip must evidently have used at one period of his life. Let us see whether it fits this message. If it does, I think the translation will not be difficult.'

She turned the slip of paper with the 'Reading' side uppermost, and by its aid commenced deciphering the telegram and arranging it into plain language. After some minutes' hard labour, she read the following as the result:

'You must come up at once. Irving is impracticable, and refuses to join until he sees his friend Sir G. H.'s signature to the deed. That signature must be obtained at any price. Come up at once.'

'That signature must be obtained at any price,' repeated Madge. 'I don't think it will be obtained. I am sure it will not if I am a match for Philip Vane!'

CHAPTER II.

VISITORS.

Although her mind was sufficiently made up as to the course which she would pursue, Madge thought it would be advisable to take counsel with Mr. Drage, and accordingly, early the next morning, she set off for the rectory. She intended to tell Mr. Drage that Philip Vane was coming to Wheatcroft on a matter of business; but did not think it necessary to explain what that business was, nor to acquaint the Rector with the information which she had gleaned by unravelling the mysteries of the cipher telegram. It would be sufficient, she thought, to tell Mr. Drage that she intended to keep herself concealed during the time her husband was at Wheatcroft; and, by every means in her power, to prevent him having the slightest

idea of her connection with Sir Geoffry's establishment.

She found the Rector taking his morning walk round the garden, with little Bertha trotting by his side. Directly she caught sight of Madge the child rushed towards her, putting up her face to be kissed, and clinging to Madge's gown with both hands.

'We were talking about you just now, Mrs. Pickering,' said the child. 'I was asking papa why you did not come back and live here. We should like it so much, pa and I would, and it would be so much more cheerful for you than staying with that cross old gentleman at Wheatcroft.'

'My dear Bertha,' said Madge with a grave smile, 'I should like to be with you very much, but I cannot come.'

'So papa said,' said the child, turning to Mr. Drage, who had just come up. 'I suppose as papa cannot have you here, that is the reason he has bought a portrait of you?'

'A portrait of me!' cried Madge, looking towards the Rector with uplifted eyebrows.

'Bertha, my darling, how can you be so ridiculous,' said the Rector. 'The fact is, Mrs. Pickering, that when at Bircester the other day, I saw in a shop window a print of a saint's head, by some German artist, and I was so struck with it that I could not resist purchasing it.'

'Yes, and he has had it nailed up over the mantelpiece in his bedroom, Mrs. Pickering; and when I told him the other day that I thought it was like you, his face grew quite red. Didn't it, papa?'

'Now run away, darling, and don't talk nonsense,' said the Rector, whose cheeks were burning; then as the child darted off, he turned to his visitor and said, 'Have you any news, Mrs. Pickering, as you are away from home so early?'

'I have indeed,' she replied, 'and strange news. Philip Vane is coming to Wheatcroft!'

'Good heavens!' cried the Rector. 'That woman has told him of your visit to her.'

'O, no,' said Madge with a smile, 'she

has not told him; she will not tell him. She has determined to play the game out in her own way, and to run the risk. No, Mr. Vane is coming with another gentleman from London to see Sir Geoffry on business.'

The Rector gave a sudden start, and a bright eager look crossed his face, but died away immediately.

'He will be at Wheatcroft, then, some little time?' he said.

'He will pass one night there,' replied Madge. 'The distance from London is too great for them to return the same day. Besides, they have business to discuss with Sir Geoffry which will probably take some hours.'

'What do you intend to do?'

'I intend asking Sir Geoffry's permission to remain in my room. In the ordinary course of events, a person in my position would not be brought into contact with company remaining for so short a period in the house; and it is only through Sir Geoffry's courtesy and consideration that I take a more prominent place in the household. I shall

retire to my room when they arrive, and remain there until after their departure. The name of Mrs. Pickering, the housekeeper, will doubtless be mentioned occasionally, but it is one which Mr. Vane has never heard of in connection with me, and will convey to his mind no idea of me whatsoever. Do you approve of what I propose doing?'

'Perfectly,' said Mr. Drage, with a nervous and excited air. 'It is most important that your husband should not know of your presence in this place. You feel tolerably certain that Mrs. Bendixen has not acquainted him with your visit?'

'I feel quite certain of it,' said Madge. 'Her last words to me were convincing on that point.'

'Then Mr. Vane will stay over the night at Wheatcroft. Who is the other gentleman who is coming down with him?'

'The chairman of the company of which Mr. Vane is the general manager.'

'The chairman! O, then it is through him that the business will principally be con-

ducted; and Mr. Vane is probably only coming down to be referred to on points of detail. Is he a man likely to walk out much while he is here?'

'What an extraordinary question!' said Madge. 'I can scarcely understand what you mean.'

'I meant was he fond of exercise? Some men whose lives are passed in the City are delighted at every chance of getting into the fresh air. However, I only asked for the sake of something to say. I think you are perfectly right in what you propose, my dear Mrs. Pickering, and I would recommend you to take every precaution that your intentions are not frustrated.'

He spoke in a nervous, jerky manner, quite foreign to his nature, and half put forth his hand, as though about to wish her good-bye. It was evident that he was anxious for her departure, so Madge, wondering much what could have so strangely moved her friend, took her leave. The Rector accompanied her to the gate, and then, returning to

his study, turned the key in the lock, and falling upon his knees, prayed long and fervently.

When Madge arrived at Wheatcroft she found Sir Geoffry in a state of great excitement.

'I have received a letter from these gentlemen, Mrs. Pickering,' he said, 'and they will be here at midday to-morrow. Very luxurious fellows for men of business they seem to be too. Springside is too far distant from London for them to complete the journey in one day; they must sleep at Bircester, forsooth. Deuced easy style this Mr. Delabole writes in too; says he has no doubt that, after I have perused the private papers which he intends bringing with him, and listened to all he has to say, I shall be convinced of the excellence of the undertaking, and that he shall carry away the deed duly inscribed with my name. He speaks so confidently that the investment which he proposes must be a very sound one, or else he must have but a poor opinion of my business

qualifications. I daresay he thinks it will be easy enough, with specious words and cooked accounts, to get over an old soldier; however, that will remain to be proved. You will be quite ready for the reception of these gentlemen, Mrs. Pickering, and will make them comfortable, I am sure.'

'You may depend upon their being made perfectly comfortable, Sir Geoffry,' said Madge. 'There will, I presume, be no occasion for my being in attendance when they are here?'

'None in the world,' said Sir Geoffry promptly.

'I mean that I shall not be called upon to see them, and that I may keep to my room during their stay?'

'Certainly, if you wish it,' said Sir Geoffry. 'But you know, Mrs. Pickering, that I am rather proud of you, and—'

'I am a little over-fatigued by my journey, and I dread any introduction to strangers, fearing that I might absolutely break down. I—'

'Don't say another word about it; you shall do exactly as you please, and no stress shall be laid upon you. Sensitive woman that,' said the old General to himself, looking after Madge's retreating figure, 'high-spirited, and all that kind of thing. Does not mind the people about here, but doesn't like strangers. Is afraid, I suppose, of meeting people who knew her in better days, and who would be ashamed of recognising her in her present position. Now I must once more look through the papers which Irving sent to me, and coach myself up in readiness to meet these gentlemen from the City.'

Punctual to its time, the train containing the two gentlemen arrived at the Springside station the following morning, and Mr. Delabole, hopping briskly out, called a fly, then turned back to assist his companion in extricating their luggage from the carriage. There were but few persons on the platform, for it was an early and unfashionable train; but amongst them was a tall, thin man, of stooping figure, dressed in a long clergyman's coat,

who hovered round the two strangers, and seemed to take particular notice of them—such particular notice as to attract Mr. Vane's attention, and induce him to inquire jocularly of Mr. Delabole who was his friend. Whereupon Mr. Delabole stared with easy assurance at the tall gentleman, and told Mr. Vane that their friend was probably a parson who had got wind of the rich marriage Mr. Vane was about to make, and had come there to draw him of a little money for the local charities.

They drove straight to Wheatcroft, and on their arrival were received with much formality and politeness by Sir Geoffry, who told them that luncheon was awaiting them. During the discussion of this meal, at which the three gentlemen alone were present, the conversation was entirely of a social character: Springside, its natural beauties and its mineral waters; the style of persons frequenting it; the differences between a town and country life—were all lightly touched upon. The talk then drifted into a discussion on the speculative

mania which had recently laid such hold upon English society, then filtering off into a narrow channel of admiration for Mr. Irving and his Midas-like power, worked back into the broad stream of joint-stock companies and rapid fortune-making, and finally settled down upon the Terra del Fuegos mine. During this conversation, Sir Geoffry had given utterance to various caustic remarks, and what he imagined were unpleasant truths, all of which, though somewhat chafed at by Mr. Vane, were received by Mr. Delabole, who acted as spokesman for himself and his friend, with the greatest suavity, and were replied to with the utmost coolness and good temper. The promptitude which his companion displayed in seizing upon every word uttered by their host as a personal matter was not without its effect upon Mr. Delabole. When Sir Geoffry pushed his chair back from the table and suggested that they should adjourn to the library, there to discuss the object of their visit, Mr. Delabole said:

'If you have no objection, Sir Geoffry, I

think that this question will be more likely to be brought to a speedy conclusion if it is left to you and me. My friend Mr. Vane is invaluable in all matters of detail, and when we come to them we can request him to favour us with his presence; for the old saying of two being better company than three holds good in business discussions as well as in social life, and if you have no objection, I think the basis of any arguments which are to be made between our friend Irving represented by you, and the company represented by me, would better be settled by us alone.'

Sir Geoffry bowed stiffly enough. 'Whatever Mr. Delabole thought he should be happy to agree to. From the position which Mr. Delabole held in the City, it was quite evident that in such a talk as they proposed to have, he, by himself, would be more than a match for an old retired Indian officer.'

Mr. Delabole smiled at this speech. 'There was, he hoped, no question of brains or ingenuity in it. If the stability and excellence of the investment did not by themselves per-

suade Sir Geoffry to advise his friend to embark in it—and he hoped to embark in it a little himself—no blandishments of his should be brought forward to bring about that end. It was simply a question of confidence and figures, not of listening to compliments and blarney. He would willingly retire with the General into the library, while his good friend Mr. Vane would perhaps stroll about the grounds, taking care to be within call if his valuable services were required.'

His good friend Mr. Vane, who during luncheon had been paying particular attention to some old and remarkable Madeira which was on the table, did not seem at all to relish this plan. At first, he seemed inclined to make some open remonstrance, but a glance from underneath Mr. Delabole's bushy eyebrows dissuaded him therefrom, and he contented himself by shrugging his shoulders and indulging in other mild signs of dissent and objection. Previously to retiring with Mr. Delabole, Sir Geoffry, with punctilious courtesy, accompanied Mr. Vane to the hall-door;

pointed out to him where were the pleasantest walks in the grounds, how best to reach the spots from whence the favourite views were to be obtained, and handed him the keys of the conservatory and the gates opening into the home park. Mr. Vane received all this politeness very coolly, inwardly determining to take the first opportunity of revenging himself on Mr. Delabole for the unceremonious treatment received at that gentleman's hands.

Left to himself, Mr. Vane strolled idly about the grounds, switching the heads off the flowers with his cane, and cursing Delabole's impudence for having relegated him to the duties of the second fiddle.

'Make the best of your time, my good friend,' said he, stretching himself upon a bench shaded by the overhanging branches of a large tree, 'make the best of your time, to swagger and give yourself airs, and show that you are the head of the concern; while I am, or am supposed to be, only one of its paid officers; for within a week, or ten days at the

outside, I shall be my own master, and if you attempt anything of that kind with me then, I shall be in a position to tell you my opinion of you in the very plainest language. Don't think I have not noticed of late how very tightly you have drawn the rope which binds me to you! Telegraphed for when I am away, told to go here and there, to find out this and that, brought down here and shunted on one side, as though I were a mere clerk, whose business it is to make memoranda of what may pass between their excellencies! O, my good friend Delabole, you may take your oath I will not forget this. When once my marriage with Mrs. Bendixen is an accomplished fact, and I have the knowledge that I am beyond any harm which you could do me, then you shall taste the leek which you have compelled me so frequently of late to swallow. I will put my foot on your neck, as you have put yours on mine. I will— Hallo, who's this coming this way? One of the gardeners, I suppose. No, by Jove! the parson who was at the station, and who seemed to take such

interest in us and our movements. What can he want? He must be a friend of Sir Geoffry's, and makes his way through the grounds as a short cut from one part of his parish to the other. He will see I am a friend of the General's, and will want to enter into conversation. I hate parsons, and sha'n't take any notice of him.'

With this amiable resolve, Mr. Vane curled up his feet beneath him on the bench, pulled out a cigar, and was just about to light it, when, glancing up from under the brim of his hat, he saw the clergyman standing beside him.

Philip Vane dropped the cigar, and sprang to his feet.

'Who are you?' he cried, 'and what are you doing here?'

'There is no occasion for you to disturb yourself,' said the new comer, quietly lifting his hat. 'My name is Drage, and I am rector of one of the parishes in Springside. I am speaking to Mr. Philip Vane, I believe?'

'That's my name,' said Vane shortly, and

resuming his seat, 'though I cannot imagine how you knew it, unless you read it off my portmanteau, when you were dodging about the station this morning.'

'I knew it before I was dodging about the station, as you are politely pleased to say,' said Mr. Drage; 'I know a great deal more about you, as you will find out, before this interview is at an end!'

'The deuce you do!' said Philip Vane, with a cynical smile; 'I did not know my fame had extended to these parts. And what do you know about me, pray, Mr.—I forget your name?'

'My name, I repeat, is Drage!'

'Drage—Drage,' muttered Vane. 'Any relation of Drage, of Abchurch-lane?'

'His son.'

'A most respectable man, holding a leading position in the City. My dear Mr. Drage, I am delighted to make your acquaintance.' And he held out his hand.

'I do not think,' said Mr. Drage, taking no notice of the movement—'I do not think

that you will be quite so pleased to make my acquaintance when you have heard all I have to say!'

Philip Vane looked hard at his companion, and noted with astonishment the hectic flush in his cheeks, the brightness of his eyes, the mobile working of his mouth.

'You may say what you please,' he said shortly. 'It is a matter of perfect indifference to me. If you were in the City, your father or your father's clerks could tell you what position I hold there. City men are careful of what they say of each other; but you are a parson, and are privileged, I suppose?'

'I am a parson. It was in that capacity I became acquainted with the circumstances, the knowledge of which has induced me to seek you out. You are about to be married, Mr. Vane?'

'The dullest of laymen could have told me that,' said Mr. Vane, again with a cynical smile; 'the report was in the newspapers.'

'Exactly; but the point I am coming to has not yet found its way into the news-

papers, though it will probably be published ere long.'

'And it is—?'

'It is that you are married already!'

As Mr. Drage pronounced these words, a chill crept over Philip Vane, and for an instant he felt stupefied. But he speedily recovered himself, and looking his companion straight in the face, said:

'Either you have been befooled yourself, or you are trying to make a fool of me. In the latter case a hopeless and dangerous experiment.'

'I should not attempt to put my wits in antagonism to yours,' said the Rector quietly, 'but facts have been said to be stubborn things, and the marriage register of Chepstow Church, with the signature of Philip Vane and Margaret Pierrepoint in one of its pages, is still extant!'

'Who told you of this?' asked Vane, breathing hard and speaking low.

'Your injured and deserted wife!'

'Is the woman who once passed under

that name still alive?' inquired Vane anxiously.

'The lady who has the terrible misfortune to hold that position,' said the Rector, drawing himself up and looking at his companion with disgust, 'is alive and well.'

'And you come from her?'

'No, I am here on her behalf, but not with her knowledge.'

There was a momentary silence, broken by Vane, who said: 'And what is your object in seeking this interview with me?'

'To warn you that I am cognisant of the position in which you stand; to warn you against the commission of the crime which you contemplate—'

'And to ask for a round sum to buy off the opposition of yourself and your interesting accomplice. Is not that it, Mr. Drage?'

'You scoundrel!' said Mr. Drage. 'Do you dare to address such language to me—a clergyman?'

'If it comes to a question of language,' said Vane, with a laugh, 'I believe that "scoun-

drel" is scarcely a term much bandied about in clerical society. As a matter of fact, I have found many gentlemen of your cloth not less open to a bribe than the rest of the world.'

'You shall find one at least who scorns to discuss even the possibility of such an arrangement. Let us bring this interview to a close; you will clearly understand my object in seeking it. I came to warn you that if you persevered in carrying out this marriage, I will most assuredly hand you over to the law!'

'And I warn you that if you interfere in my business, I will kill you!' said Philip Vane savagely.

'Such a threat has no terrors for me,' said the Rector.

'Perhaps not,' said Vane, with a contemptuous glance at his companion's feeble frame; 'however, I will find some means of bringing you and your client to reason.'

'Stay,' cried Mr. Drage, 'I did not come here to bandy threats, but simply to discharge a duty. I will take no answer from you now,

irritated as you are by the discovery that your position is known to me. Think over what I have said, and save yourself from the commission of this great sin. If you have occasion to write to me, you know where I am to be found.'

Philip Vane hesitated, then bowing his head, he said in a low tone:

'You are right. Do not think any more of the wild words I uttered in my rage; leave me to think over the circumstances in which I am placed, and the manner in which I can best extricate myself from the danger into which I was about to plunge. Leave me and —Heaven bless you for your kindness.'

Mr. Drage looked at him with brimming eyes, and lifting his hat slowly walked off.

'That was the best way of settling him,' said Philip Vane to himself, as he watched the Rector down the path. 'I must push this marriage on at once, and make some excuse for its being perfectly quiet.'

CHAPTER III.

THE NEXT DAY.

Mr. Drage, smoking a sedative pipe in the rectory garden after breakfast the next morning, pondering over his strange interview with Philip Vane, and wondering when and how he should hear of its result, was startled from his reverie by the clanging of the bell, and looking up saw Mrs. Pickering at the gate. This visit was not unexpected, nor, truth to tell, had it been contemplated without alarm. The Rector felt tolerably certain that Mrs. Pickering would come to tell him how matters had progressed at Wheatcroft, during the stay of the strangers from London; but it was by no means certain that he himself might not have been seen in colloquy with Vane by some of the servants on the premises, or even

by the housekeeper herself, and that the reason for and the result of that colloquy might be demanded of him. To be sure, he argued with himself, he had informed Mrs. Pickering of his determination of some time or other seeking an interview with her husband on her behalf, and had obtained her consent, however unwillingly it was given; but he confessed to himself that Mrs. Pickering had looked upon his declared intention of seeking that interview as vague and remote, and would probably resent his having availed himself of the first opportunity which presented itself without farther communication with her on the subject.

There, however, she was at the garden gate, and, whatever happened, she must not be kept waiting. So Mr. Drage hurried down the path and gave her admittance, bidding her good-morning, with that strange mixture of earnestness and nervousness which always characterised his communications with Mrs. Pickering.

'Well, now tell me about your guests,'

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said he, after the ordinary salutation. 'They arrived according to promise. They stayed with you, and—'

'And are gone,' said Madge. 'They went off by the express this morning, to my intense relief; for I felt bound, fettered, and as though I could scarcely breathe, while they were in the house.'

'You carried out your intention of asking Sir Geoffry to allow you to keep your room?'

'Yes; he accorded it at once, and nothing could have worked better. Mr. Vane and his friend were in the house nearly four-and-twenty hours, and during the whole of that time they neither of them caught sight of me.'

'The other man might have seen you without any danger to yourself, I suppose?'

'I am not so sure of that. This Mr. Delabole is a man who followed us one day from the theatre at Wexeter, and seemed to take particular notice of us. By the way, what could have brought him to Wexeter at that time, I wonder? It was certainly the same man; I recognised his figure.'

'Indeed! Then, though unseen yourself, you managed to see them?'

'Scarcely to see them. Some time after dinner, when it was quite dusk, they went into the garden to smoke, and strolled up and down the little side path leading to the stables, which is immediately under my window. My attention was attracted to them by hearing Philip's well-remembered short sarcastic laugh. Then I peered out cautiously once or twice, and perceived them moving about in the gloom. There was not light enough for me to see their features, but I recognised the other man's square, thick-set figure, and Philip's swinging walk.'

'You heard Mr. Vane laugh?' asked the Rector, somewhat anxiously. 'He must have been amused; I conclude things must have been going well.'

'It was by no means that kind of laugh,' replied Madge, 'but one which I have heard too often not to recognise its meaning—short, hard, and sarcastic. Besides, though I could not distinguish the words they uttered, I

could hear the tone in which they spoke, and my impression was that they were using anything but pleasant language to each other.'

'That looks as though they had not been able to carry through the business which brought them down here,' said the Rector.

'I do not fancy matters went quite as smoothly as they anticipated,' said Madge. 'I spoke to Sir Geoffry just before coming out. He told me he had informed those gentlemen that he was not prepared to give them a final and decisive answer at once, but that he would write to them in the course of a few days.'

'Deliberation on such a matter in a man of Sir Geoffry's temperament does not argue well for the success of those speculating gentry,' said the Rector. 'One would scarcely imagine that a man by nature so impulsive would be inclined to deliberate over even matters of business.'

'I think that in this instance, at all events, the result of his deliberations will be to prohibit his friend from embarking in the project

which Mr. Vane and his companion came here to advocate,' said Madge. 'I cannot tell you by what means, but a curious piece of information relative to this very affair has fallen into my hands. I shall lay it before Sir Geoffry prior to his writing his decision, and I have no doubt of the way in which it will influence him.'

'I hope there is no chance of—of your husband hearing of the part which you propose to take in this matter?' said the Rector nervously.

'Not the least chance in the world, I should imagine,' said Madge. 'But suppose he were to hear of it, what then?'

'It might induce him to be more bitter against you.'

'Nothing could render him more bitter against me than the knowledge—if he ever acquired it—that I had explained to his future wife the impossibility of his legal marriage with her.'

'No, but—suppose he should give up that project and repent, the knowledge of this in-

terference on your part might aggravate him against you, and prevent his doing the justice which he otherwise would.'

'Give up that project and repent! Philip Vane repenting and doing justice! My dear Mr. Drage, what can you be thinking of? You have only heard of Mr. Vane through me; and either my descriptive or your appreciative powers must be poor indeed, if you could think that such a man could be led to give up any project from which he is to derive great benefit and comfort. However, we need not discuss this matter any farther; there cannot be the slightest implied connection between me and the answer which Sir Geoffry will send on this matter of business. As Mr. Vane has passed twenty-four hours under the same roof with me in complete ignorance of my proximity, he cannot imagine me to be in collusion with his opponent; and even if Mrs. Bendixen were to tell him of my visit to her, she could not give him any clue to my abode.'

Mr. Drage said no more. He felt quite

certain that if Philip Vane were to hear of his wife's interference in his business project, all hopes of the repentance and reformation which his last words seemed to convey were at an end. And Mr. Drage believed in the possibility of his arguments having produced a salutary effect. 'The man's manner was so real,' he said to himself. 'He was evidently touched.'

Meanwhile Madge, making the best of her way home, was wondering what the Rector could have meant by his allusion to the possibility of Philip Vane's being induced, by any means other than threatened exposure, to give up the project on which his heart was fixed. Although Mr. Drage had talked vaguely about seeking an interview in which he would warn Philip of the iniquity of the course he was pursuing, and of the danger which awaited him if he persisted in it, Madge had no notion that the quiet, nervous invalid would have had the courage to carry his plan into effect. What he had said arose from that simplicity and want of knowledge of the world, which

she had often remarked in him. Madge did not rightly estimate the depth of the mine of love in that honest heart. Since the time when she had told him of the impossibility of her ever being more to him than a friend, the Rector had carefully abstained from any exhibition of his feeling for her, and she imagined that it had died away, or at least had given place to that merely brotherly regard which she was able and willing to accept.

When she reached Wheatcroft she found Sir Geoffry engaged in his favourite occupation of superintending the gardeners, and driving them to desperation by the conflicting suggestions which he made, and impossible orders which he desired carried out. The old General looked up as she approached, and at once advanced to meet her.

'Good-morning, Mrs. Pickering,' he said. 'You were early astir this morning. I went to your room after breakfast, but found you already flown. So I came out here to give a few directions as to the manner in which I wish this compound laid out by next summer.

There is nothing which refreshes me so much after muddling my head with complicated details of business, as to undertake a little landscape gardening, in which, I flatter myself, I have excellent taste.'

Madge, to whom the gardeners were constantly appealing when hopelessly involved by their master's contradictory instructions, thought it better not to touch upon the latter portion of this speech, so she said: 'And your business matters are now, I trust, satisfactorily disposed of, Sir Geoffry?'

'I hope so—I think so. I have pretty well made up my mind upon the course which I shall recommend to Mr. Irving, though I have not written either to him or to those gentlemen who have just left us.'

'And that course is—?'

'To decline to have anything to do with the affair.'

'I am glad of that,' said Madge earnestly, 'I am very glad of that!'

'Indeed!' said the old General, looking at her knowingly. 'Is your knowledge of the

Terra del Fuegos Mining Company somewhat greater than that merely obtainable from my casual mention of it, or from reading out to me the variation in its shares as reported in the City article?'

'My knowledge of the Company is absolutely nil,' said Madge quietly, 'but I am glad to find that you are going to dissuade your friend from entering what might prove at least a questionable speculation. Mr. Irving is a very rich man, I have heard you say, and no longer a young one. It is better in his old age that he should keep his riches—and his friends.'

'Very neatly put, Mrs. Pickering,' said Sir Geoffry, with a laugh, 'though I do not think Alec Irving would be likely to break with me, even though he lost money by following my advice. Our intimacy is of too long standing, and my recommendations hitherto have proved too successful for him to dream of that. However, in this matter there was a very large sum of money involved, and, as you say, it is better for him to

keep what he has. There is nothing that one grows so fond of as wealth; a poorer man would stand the loss with far more equanimity.'

'Your recent guests will not be pleased at your decision,' said Madge, watching him attentively.

'Then they must be displeased, my dear Mrs. Pickering,' said the General. 'I have treated them with every courtesy and given them all they wanted, except my friend's money. And at one time, by Jove, they were very nearly getting that.'

'They pleaded their cause well, then?'

'They did, indeed. So well, that if I had not happily induced them to let me have the papers last night—I sat up reading them until daybreak, and am horribly fatigued in consequence—they would probably have succeeded in inducing me to recommend their venture to Irving's consideration. They are two remarkably clever fellows; the younger man especially, Mr. Vane, argued with immense apparent earnestness, and was wonder-

fully ready with his replies to all my objections.'

'And you think they will accept your letter as a final decision?'

'I do not say that! The stake is too large for them to give up all hope of winning it without a farther effort. I should not be surprised if one of them, probably Mr. Vane, were to come down here again with more persuasive talk and more promising documents; but it will be useless, my mind is made up.'

'He surely would not come without apprising you?' asked Madge, in agitation.

'And even were he to do so,' said the General, with a smile, 'your arrangements for the domestic comforts of this house are always so complete, my dear Mrs. Pickering, that we could risk being taken unawares.'

'O yes, of course, everything could be made ready for a visitor in a very few moments. It was scarcely with that idea that I asked. However,' added Madge disjointedly, 'that will do when Mr. Vane arrives. Now,

if you do not require me farther, Sir Geoffry, I have my duties to attend to.'

'Very strange woman that,' muttered the old General. 'What has upset her, I wonder! She can't have been speculating with her savings, and investing in this mine? Of course not. It must be that she did not like being taken aback, and wanted everything proper and orderly, by any unexpected arrival. She's not without pride either, as she proved by begging to be allowed to keep out of sight during the time of those fellows' visit. Didn't like to be recognised as the housekeeper, I suppose. Strange that, and unlike her way in general. But all women are strange, I have noticed, and the less one has to do with them the better.'

The housekeeping duties which had formed Madge's excuse for quitting the General did not immediately engross her attention. She went straight to her sitting-room in anything but a peaceful frame of mind, and threw herself into a chair to cogitate over the announcement which had been just made to her. From

what Sir Geoffry had said, there was a chance that on any day, without warning, Philip Vane might come down to Wheatcroft to pass another twenty-four hours as a guest beneath its roof. In that case she would have no opportunity of taking the precaution to absent herself, or to secure herself against all chances of being accidentally brought into his presence. And there was every probability of their meeting face to face, and meeting under circumstances which would preclude any explanation on her part of how she happened to be there. She had noticed that Sir Geoffry had been scanning her curiously during the whole of their recent conversation, and she feared that if she were again to request permission to remain in seclusion during the visitors' stay, his evident suspicion might take some more definite shape. She must for the present, she thought, leave her actions to be decided by the circumstances as they arose. Her tact, her luck, let it be called what it might, had never deserted her yet, and she would trust to its promptings on the emergency.

As she rose from her seat, she was surprised at the sight of a letter lying on the table. She had been away from the house at the time of the postman's arrival, and on her first return to her room her mind had been too much occupied to allow her to think of anything but the subject which immediately engrossed her attention.

The letter was from Rose. Madge recognised that at once by its shape and size, though on taking it up she noticed that the handwriting, usually so round and clerkly, was tremulous and hurried. The word 'Immediate,' twice underscored, was also on the superscription, so that Madge, alarmed, quickly broke open the envelope, and fearing that her sister was ill or unhappy, hurried through the contents. They were as follows:

DEAREST MADGE,—I don't mind telling you that I was a good deal annoyed when I received your answer to my last, saying that you could not either meet me at some nice

seaside place as I proposed, where we might spend my holiday together, or that you would not allow me to come down to Springside and see as much of you as you could manage. I was annoyed, dear, because I have been for ever such a time longing to be with you, and to talk to you, and because it seemed so hard that you should merely tell me 'you could not,' and 'you could not,' without going into any explanation. I know you think that my stock of common sense is not very large, and I myself am ready to admit the fact, only I don't like having it pointed out to me quite so plainly.

However, I know that everything you do always somehow turns out for the best, and so it happened in this instance. If I had come away from London, as I proposed to do, I might not have heard something—two things really—which may be of the very greatest importance to me—I mean to us. When I say 'us,' of course you will understand, from what I wrote to you in my last letter, that I mean to Gerald and myself!

O, Madge! I can scarcely tell you the extraordinary things that have happened, the wonderful discovery which I have made. I don't know exactly how to begin to tell it; I know that properly I ought to keep my great secret for the last, but then, perhaps, you wouldn't have patience to read so far, so that I had better blurt it out at once.

Well, then, you must know that the old gentleman in whose house you are living, your master I suppose I must call him—don't be annoyed, Madge, you know I wouldn't pain you, but I am so bad at explaining these things — Sir Geoffry Heriot, that is the best way to put it, is Gerald's father. Fancy that, Madge; fancy your living in the same house with that old man, seeing him every day, ordering his dinner, and that kind of thing, and not having the least idea that he was Gerald's father. He seems to be a very horrid old person, with a most abominable temper. Not that Gerald will allow this for a moment, but I am sure it must be so from what he tells me about him. You

know, Madge, we always fancied at Wexeter that Gerald was a gentleman's son, and that he had run away from home, and this appears to be the case. When he was quite a lad, just before he came to old Dobson's theatre, he had a terrible quarrel with his father, who treated him most shamefully, and turned him out of the house. I do not quite understand what the quarrel was about, but I am certain Gerald was in the right.

The one thing which I remember in this story is, that Sir Geoffry had quarrelled with his wife as well as his son, and was infuriated against Gerald because he took his mother's part. It seems that Sir Geoffry, in early life, brought some terrible accusation against his wife, an accusation which Gerald, when he heard of it, imagined to be false, and was determined to disprove. He intended to devote all his time to solving this mystery, but he had his living to get, poor fellow! He had scarcely any leisure when at Wexeter, and what he had, he said, he employed in a different way. Why did Gerald blush when

he said that, Madge? I don't think he was in love with me when we were in Miss Cave's lodgings; but he did blush, and looked quite strange when he mentioned it.

However, he did find it out; and now comes the extraordinary part of the story. He discovered that his father had been deceived, and had acted with the greatest injustice towards his mother; and in his old impulsive way, which I daresay you will recollect, Madge, he determined on starting off at once to see Sir Geoffry, and to lay before him the facts which he had learned. And he went! Without saying a word to me he hurried off to Springside, and actually made his way to Wheatcroft. Fancy that, Madge! Fancy Gerald being actually in the same house with you, and neither of you knowing anything about it. Of course I didn't then know who his father was; he only took me into his confidence on his return, or I should have told him about your being there.

It seems to have been a dreadful business, Madge. Sir Geoffry flew into a towering pas-

sion directly he saw him. Would not listen to a word he had to say, and actually ordered the servant to turn him out of the house. It seems too dreadful to think of, after all Gerald's patience and suffering, to receive such cruel treatment from his own father! It was an awful shock to him. Since his return he seems quite a changed man. He has lost all that fire and energy which I daresay you will remember as characteristic of him, and does nothing but brood over the wrongs he has received. More keenly than anything he seems to feel the injustice which Sir Geoffry does him in suspecting that he had merely invented the discovery of his mother's innocence as a means to restore himself to his old position and his father's favour. If Sir Geoffry could only be brought to acknowledge how wrong that suspicion is, I am sure that half Gerald's misery would disappear.

And Sir Geoffry must be brought to acknowledge it, and a reconciliation must be effected between father and son, and, what is more, all this must be done by you, Madge!

Yes, by you! I have not told Gerald one word about your being at Wheatcroft; I thought it better not. So that whatever is done will come upon him as a surprise. I will not attempt for an instant to suggest what you should do. Your clear head and common sense are sure to prompt the proper course; but the result must be, Sir Geoffry's acceptance of his wife's innocence, and Gerald's restoration to his home.

You can do this, Madge, and I know you will! You would have exerted yourself in any case, but you will exert yourself more than ever now, for one reason which I have kept till the last. I told you that I was madly in love with Gerald, but that he did not make love to me. Now, Madge, he has asked me to be his wife. He first spoke to me before that dreadful visit to Wheatcroft. Since his return he has asked me again. He wishes us to be married, he said, and to commence our new life in some foreign country. But I would not have him go away while matters remain as they are between him and his fa-

ther. Now you see the importance of the task I have intrusted to you, and you will throw your whole heart into it, I know.

Your loving

Rose.

A pang shot through Madge's heart as she read the concluding lines of this letter.

'Gerald about to be married—and to Rose,' she said dreamily, letting the letter drop from her hand. Then rose up before her mental vision the old Crescent at Wexeter, round which she and Gerald Hardinge had walked on that well-remembered night. His words rang again in her ears. 'You know how I love and worship you, my darling! How, since the first hour I saw you, I have been your slave, never happy but when near you, and having no other thought but of and for you.'

And now he was going to be married to Rose! Madge bent her head upon her breast, and her muttered words, 'I suppose it is all for the best,' sounded very hopelessly.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. DELABOLE SHOWS HIS HAND.

Every two or three years, at greater or less intervals, there comes upon the City of London a something which may or may not be the precursor of a panic, but which, in itself, is a species of blight with very gloomy influences. It spreads from the highest to the lowest, from the magnates who meet in the Bank parlour to settle the rate of discount, down to the copying clerks and the office lads at fifteen shillings a week. The brokers and jobbers come on 'Change earlier, and remain considerably later than usual; anxious telegrams, couched in mysterious language, flash to and fro between the metropolis and the great centres of commerce, the City editors of

newspapers—mysterious men, whose ordinary communications to the journal by which they are employed are only made through their clerks—then appear in person in the dingy penetralia of Fleet-street, and the intelligence which they convey is as carefully weighed and as jealously printed as the leakage of the deliberations of a cabinet.

Some such state of affairs exists at the present moment. See the roofs of the inward-bound suburban omnibuses, masses of waving newspaper broadsides, in which are buried the clerks who are devouring their contents; hear the hum which buzzes through every chop-house and tavern within a mile of the Royal Exchange; chop-houses and taverns, at this autumnal time of the year usually deserted, but now overflowing, as in high mid-winter, with a crowd of eating, drinking talking guests. See the homeward-bound continental steamers and the London hurrying trains crammed with chairmen, directors, managers, secretaries, and staff, who have been away pleasure-seeking on their annual

holiday, but are summoned back to duty by the first breath of the note of danger. See the one-eyed appearance of the houses in Belgravia and Tyburnia, to which the master has returned alone — leaving his family in the German gambling-place, on the Italian lake, or by the English seaboard—and where he shivers amidst the holland-covered furniture of the gloomy dining-room, slips about in the carpetless bedroom, and tosses in the ill-made bed, 'done for' by the fluffy female in charge of the house. See the chambers only half painted, and the lodgings with temporary denizens inducted into them, to the horror of the regular tenants, who have unexpectedly returned. See the dreary days and long nights intended to have been spent in sketching-parties, and picnic-parties, and flirtations; on Swiss mountains; in looking on at the board of green cloth, and watching the spinning ball, or the shuffled cards; in bathing, and boating, and pleasure-taking generally; but now condemned to be passed over deeds and ledgers, in file biting and hair splitting,

and wondering when the worst will come, and how it is to be met.

The Bank rate of discount has gone up two per cent, money is tight, and several old-established houses are declared to be 'cranky.' As for the new companies, which came into notice two years ago, in the first blush of the 'promoting' period, eight or nine of them have gone already. Little Mr. Grimmer, the celebrated bankruptcy attorney, now staying down at Margate, where he has taken a house on the Fort, and where his phaeton and pair are the admiration of the neighbourhood, reads the money article of the evening paper with infinite gusto, and instructs his youngest daughter, whom he idolises, to mix him another glass of whisky-and-water, to which a portion of the news he re-peruses as he drinks it adds a lemony flavour. No need for Mr. Grimmer to hurry up to town yet: his clerks know when his presence is required, and can summon him by telegraph. Meanwhile let him ozonise his wiry little body as much as possible, and rest

his busy brain. There will be plenty of work for him when Term begins in November, when, in the Bankruptcy Court, the 'judges are met—a terrible show'—and when 'dividend deferred,' and 'applications to register,' 'trustees' releases,' and all the jargon of the court, shall mean costs, and costs, and costs, all to be added by Mr. Grimmer to the heap already put away in store for the sole benefit of his bright-eyed little daughter.

Amidst the smashes which were resounding on every side no harm had yet come to the Terra del Fuegos Mining Company. Several apparently flourishing speculations, originally promoted by Philip Vane, and to the floating of which Mr. Delabole had lent a hand, had gone to unutterable grief. These two worthies had long since seceded from them, and their places had been filled by men of minor capacity and considerably less courage. Men who pottered when they ought to have struck, and struck when they ought to have delayed; inferior beings, whose fate was dismissed by Mr. Delabole with a

shoulder-shrug, and by Mr. Vane with a contemptuous oath. But the Terra del Fuegos stood firm at a time when every public company in London was under the harrow of discussion, and, so far as possible, examination. It may be imagined that it did not escape its share of censorious gossip. Clerks will talk; even such intensely respectable men as those, old and young, employed under Mr. Vane. What the clerks said was merely this. That whereas the letters and reports from the mines, after having been read by the general manager and the board, were usually sent into the outer office to be copied, those recently received had been detained by the general manager. On its being farther debated amongst the clerks whether these reports had been submitted to the directors or read and bottled by the 'Toff' and 'Pod,' names by which Mr. Vane and Mr. Delabole were distinguished by their subordinates, the question being put to the vote, it was carried by a majority that the reports *had* been read and bottled by the said T. and P. It is

further noticed by the employés that the 'Pod' had been away from London for a fortnight, and that the 'Toff,' who had returned from his short holiday, and was on duty again, had been constantly in receipt of telegrams, which scarcely seemed to improve his temper.

But there were other signs of coming squalls which the respectable clerks did not notice, but to which the initiated might well pay attention. Little Mr. Naseby—for the first time in his life—drove down to the City offices of the company, in which he held so large a stake. He asked for Mr. Delabole; but, in that gentleman's absence, was ushered in to Mr. Philip Vane. His manner was wearied and languid, soft and sybaritic as usual; but the questions he put to the general manager were keen and probing. Mr. Vane had seen Mr. Naseby before, knew that he enjoyed Delabole's confidence, knew also that he was a perfumer in Bond-street. Dissatisfied with Delabole for the moment, and with Mrs. Bendixen's immediately-to-be-

touched sixty thousand pounds before his eyes, Philip Vane thought fit to snub Mr. Naseby, and to reply first vaguely, and then insolently, to the queries put to him. Nothing could be better bred than the little perfumer's manner; a short dry cough was his strongest deprecation of the treatment which he received. He bowed himself out politely, and took off his hat to the clerks generally as he passed through the outer office. But on his way to the West End he stopped his brougham in Throgmorton-street, and instructed his brokers, Messrs. Bullen and Baren, to sell out every share he possessed in the Terra del Fuegos Silver Mining Company.

Mr. Parkinson, of Thavies Inn, was also considerably disquieted at the aspect of affairs, and the government office clerks and the financially hampered barristers who attended at his chambers for the purpose of money-borrowing, found him more than ever astonished at the nature of their requests, and more than ever disinclined, as they phrased it, 'to

part.' Mr. Parkinson, knowing himself to be a vulgar, weak, and irritable man, wisely refrained from visiting the City office, where Philip Vane would, he was perfectly certain, have probed each of his tenderest sores, and probably exasperated him into committing himself. But he found means of communicating with Mr. Delabole, with whom he had an intimate acquaintance of many years' standing, and the replies which he received from that gentleman, though short, were so extremely irritating, that Mrs. Parkinson expressed herself roundly on his domestic bearing, and even the vicar hinted that his churchwarden was more prompt to anger than he had supposed. And there were other directors and shareholders who, many personally and some by letter, were worrying the office to know how matters stood, and asking for information which was in no degree imparted to them.

All this time Philip Vane was to be found at his post, attending to business with the greatest regularity, seeing everybody who de-

sired admittance to him, and saying to each and all of them as little as possible. From the hour of his initiation into a high City position, he had dropped his soft, specious, pleasant manner, and adopted a sharp, curt tone, partly because he thought it was business-like, partly to save time, which now was really valuable to him. But since this gloom had settled down upon the financial world, his tone had become more curt than ever. He returned the briefest answers to all questions put to him, and when any visitors were shown in to him, invariably stood up, that the new comers might not have any excuse for sitting down.

'Good-morning,' he echoed, on the tenth day of the pressure, after a fussy old retired admiral, who had just taken his leave, 'and be hanged to you,' he added, as he saw the door safely close. 'That's the fifth man I have seen during the quarter of an hour I have been here, and I have not had time to look at my letters yet.' He sat down at his desk and began rapidly sorting into two di-

visions the large mass of papers which lay upon it. The larger of these two divisions he sent into the outer office by a clerk summoned for the purpose, while he ran his eye again over the smaller one, and selected therefrom one letter for immediate perusal. It was very short, but its contents seemed to be satisfactory. 'At last,' he muttered, as he placed the letter carefully in the breast-pocket of his coat, 'at last I am to obtain a little relief from this perpetual wear and tear of body and soul. He is coming back to-morrow, he says, and I shall put it plainly to him at once that my marriage must be no longer postponed, no matter what might be the consequences. He will oppose it, I know that, urging as his reason the panic and the dubious information last received from the mines, but I am determined not to be put off any longer. In—I was going to say in gratitude to him, but I do not think there is much of that in my composition—in deference to his wishes, that's a better phrase, I have postponed it two or three times, partly be-

cause he has undoubtedly done me many good turns, and may have the opportunity of doing me many more, and partly because he has, or had, strong influence with Mrs. Bendixen, which he might have used against me. If, however, I judge women rightly — and I ought to be able to, if experience is of any use in such matters—from what I have noticed of the widow during the last few days, I may safely pit myself against that or any other influence. There is no question of giving me up, the boot is on the other leg, by George; all she seems afraid of is of losing me. Wonderful how extraordinarily attentive, and all that kind of thing, she has been since she came back from the Isle of Wight; never seems to like to let me out of her sight, and remains in London during all this beastly muggy weather for the mere sake of seeing me every day. Odd, but gratifying—uncommonly gratifying.' And, from the mere force of habit, Mr. Vane opened a drawer in his desk, and took from it a hand-mirror, into which he looked for some moments at the

bright black eyes, and the sound pearly teeth, and the close-cut beard, which had worked so potent a charm.

'Yes,' he added, as he replaced the glass and closed the drawer, 'I think I could defy my friend Delabole, if there were to come any split between us. He might counsel the widow, but I should carry her off. She would thank him; she would cling to me. With the chances before me, I will defy any one in the world, except—' And a cold shiver ran through him as the thought passed across his brain—'except that parson at Springside. I have contrived to keep the thought of that cursed fellow, and all he said, well under, but it will surge up from time to time. Yes, if he were quieted I should be perfectly safe; for Madge, beyond confessing it to him, has evidently neither the application nor the inclination to take any farther steps. Perhaps she does not even know anything about my intended marriage. This man Drage learned it doubtless from that infernal paragraph in the paper; but Madge never used to read any

papers except the *Haresfoot*, and it would scarcely be in that. I wonder,' he thought to himself, leaning back in his chair dreamily, and plunging his hands into his pockets, 'where Madge is and what she is doing! I never could see her name in any London playbill, or hear of any one at all resembling her. How did this parson come to know her? How did he become so intimate with her that she should confide to him that great secret? He may be the chaplain of some hospital, and she may have told him when she was very ill! Perhaps she's dead! I never thought of that.' And for the first time since his separation from her, Philip Vane had a kindly recollection of the young wife whom he had deserted years ago.

He was roused from his reverie by a rap at the door, followed by the entrance of a clerk, who laid a card upon the table, and was bidden to usher the visitor in. The visitor when he entered happened to be Doctor Asprey, dressed, as usual, with scrupulous care, soft, bland, and placid. The clerk placed a

chair for Doctor Asprey, who was not one of those clients whom the general manager received standing. Even if the Doctor had not been, as he was, an intimate and constant visitor at the office, he was not the style of man whom one could have treated with such impertinence.

'And what brings you into the City to-day, Doctor Asprey,' asked Philip Vane, when they had exchanged salutations, 'after being so recently here? You are not one of those gobemouches who come down to pick up rumours that they may repeat at evening-paper time in their clubs, nor are you "our own artist," commissioned to sketch the scene of the panic for one of the illustrated journals.'

'No,' said the Doctor, with a quiet smile, 'I do not aspire to any such high position. I simply looked in to know if you had heard anything of Delabole; if you had any precise information as to the date of his return.'

'I had a letter from him this morning,' replied Vane, 'in which he says he shall be back without fail to-morrow.'

'To-morrow, good,' said the Doctor, with the slightest manifestation of relief at the intelligence. 'I am glad to hear it, but I should not have come into the City on purpose, even to make this inquiry. The fact is, I was summoned down to a very special meeting of the board of the insurance office opposite, the Friendly Grasp, to which I am consulting physician. An awkward business; a widow has made claim for seven thousand pounds, the sum for which her husband was insured.'

'There is nothing strange in that surely, my dear doctor,' said Philip Vane, smiling.

'Nothing at all,' said the Doctor. 'One noticeable feature in the case is, that the directors know that the man was poisoned, but there is nothing particularly strange in that.'

'Know he was poisoned! They suspect so, you mean.'

'They know it, my dear sir. I know it. I am as morally certain of it as I am that you are talking to me now.'

'And whom do they imagine to be the murderer?'

'The widow,' said the Doctor quietly, 'and an accomplice, a young man, a general practitioner, whom, it is said, she is about to marry.'

'The insurance office will fight the case, of course?' asked Vane.

'I think not. I strongly counselled them not, as it is comparatively a young office; and I strongly advised them to wait for some future case before coming before the public with a prosecution.'

'Some future case! Do you mean to say these things are of common occurrence?'

'My good sir, there are hundreds of cases every year in which men and women are murdered, and of which nothing is known. I would undertake to kill you with a poison of which no trace should ever be discovered, to stab you in a vital part, so that you should die instantly, and there should scarcely be a drop of blood to tell where you had been hit. My dear Mr. Vane, I am horrifying you with

my professional talk. You look positively unnerved.'

'Not at all,' stammered Philip Vane. 'I am intensely interested. Pray continue. You were saying that—'

'Not another word to-day,' said the Doctor, rising. 'I must run off; I must, indeed. I shall see you to-morrow, when I look in to talk to Delabole. Now, adieu.' He shook hands politely, but formally, with the general manager, and took his departure.

And Mr. Philip Vane remained for an hour motionless, passive, and chewing the cud of the reflections which Doctor Asprey's words had aroused in his mind.

The next day Mr. Delabole arrived at the office. The very sight of him inspired the clerks, and such of the public as were doing business in the outer office, with hope and comfort. His eyes were bright, his cheeks flushed with health, his manner jaunty. His diamond rings blazed as he waved his fat, white little hand in courteous acknowledgment of his subordinates' greeting. The hall-

porter essayed to precede him, but Mr. Delabole was much too quick for the plethoric functionary, and made his own way into the general manager's room, into which he passed, after a sharp decisive rap.

Philip Vane was seated at his desk, up to his elbows in an accumulated mass of paper. The sight seemed to afford Mr. Delabole some amusement, as he burst into a low but very hearty laugh at once.

'Hallo!' said Vane, looking up from his work, 'it is you, is it; the prodigal returned? Glad you seem amused. You would have found it anything but a laughing matter if you had been here. It has been all very fine for you, spending your substance in riotous living, but deuced hard lines for us who have had to champ away at these husks,' pointing to the papers, 'which the swine refuse to swallow.'

'How charmingly scriptural and poetic is the dear boy in his illustrations!' murmured Mr. Delabole. 'Yes, Philip, I have returned!'

'Not before it was time,' growled Mr. Vane.

'Exactly, but not after; in the very nick.'

'I am glad you think so,' said Vane gloomily. 'But you were not beforehand, you will at least acknowledge, when you have read this.' And he handed a note across the table.

'Naseby—resigns directorship, no longer qualified—has sold shares. I was aware of this; I received this news by telegram the night before last. Hence my letter to you of yesterday—my return to-day.'

'O, then you do feel it of importance. I am glad to think you are impressed with the facts. From the first blush of your manner you appeared to me determined to carry everything off with a high hand.'

'My dear friend Vane, I am always impressible by facts, and what you mean by carrying off matters with a high hand, is simply that I keep my wits about me, and am not downcast by trifles.'

'The rats are leaving the sinking ship,' said Vane sententiously, pointing to the letter.

'A very inapt illustration,' retorted Delabole. 'In the first place, the ship is not sinking; in the second, this particular rat was hunted out of it through a mistake of the officer left in charge.'

'You are alluding to me?' asked Philip Vane, flushing with rage.

'I am alluding to you, my dear Philip,' replied Delabole quietly, 'and to no one else. Naseby came here for certain information. He is a wealthy but pompous little man; you ignored his wealth, and insulted his pomposity by your—pardon me, my dear Philip, I have not the advantages of your education, and can find no other word for it—by your misplaced "cheek;" he retired in dudgeon, and threw up the whole concern.'

'That's his version of the case, and—'

'That is my common-sense view of it. But there is no reason that it should form a cause of argument between us, as there are hundreds of other Nasebys, or equivalents to Naseby, in the world. All that we have to do is to get hold of them at once.'

'Yes, that is all,' said Philip Vane, with a sneer, 'but is it easy?'

'Yes, it is not difficult, provided proper means are taken,' said Mr. Delabole. 'We must, all of us, throw ourselves heart and soul into the breach, and work our utmost until we have accomplished our ends.'

'Yes,' said Philip Vane. 'It is well for you, who have just returned from a fortnight's holiday, to talk about working your utmost, but I confess I am not able to second that admirable proposition. I have already twice postponed my marriage for your convenience, and I was only awaiting your return to fix an immediate day, and arrange for absenting myself from the City for some little time.'

'I am greatly afraid, my dear Vane,' said Mr. Delabole firmly, but with perfect calmness, 'that that cannot be.'

'Cannot be!' repeated Vane, starting from his chair. 'And why not?'

'Because,' said Delabole, still calmly, 'because the business of the office will not permit it.'

'Business of the office be d——d!' said Vane savagely. 'What business is there that presses for which I am specially required?'

'A little matter involving peculiar nicety of handling,' said Mr. Delabole, rising from his seat. 'No one there,' he continued, closing the door after he had opened it suddenly and looked out. 'It is well to be particular both as regards eye-shot and ear-shot in these matters,' he added, poking the escutcheon of the lock over the keyhole with his stick. 'I see from the letter you sent me that our farther application to Sir Geoffry Heriot has been fruitless, and that he still refuses to sign the deed.'

'That's so.'

'In this crisis,' said Mr. Delabole, 'Irving's coöperation would be invaluable to us.'

'That coöperation we shall never get.'

'Unless Sir Geoffry gives us his signature,' said Mr. Delabole, looking straight into the air before him, and playing with his watch-chain.

'He is a hard, inflexible man,' said Philip Vane. 'He will never give in!'

'Then,' said Mr. Delabole slowly, and with his eyes still in the air, 'we must get somebody to get his signature for us.'

'And that somebody—?'

'That somebody is you, my dear Philip,' said Mr. Delabole, fixing his eyes on Vane's face, and pointing straight at him with his forefinger.

'I!' cried Vane loudly; then lowering his voice in deference to a gesture from his companion, he added: 'Do you think you will get me to do this job for you?'

'I am perfectly certain of it,' retorted Delabole.

'You must bring some very special influence to bear upon me,' said Vane, with a sneer.

'I intend to.'

'May I ask what it is?'

'If you do, I answer you plainly. The loss of Mrs. Bendixen and her sixty thousand pounds.'

'You overrate your influence in that quarter, my good sir,' said Philip Vane, with a sigh of relief.

'It is not my influence, my good sir, but the influence of the law; the influence of the parish register of Chepstow Church, of Margaret Pierrepoint, your wife, the actress whom you went down to see by stealth at Wexeter, and whom I went down to see too; whose life I have tracked backward and forward, and whose life's history I have at my tongue's end. Do you wish farther personal evidences? Shall I ring the bell for Gillman, whom I employed to work the case out for me, or do you acknowledge the authenticity of my information?'

'I acknowledge it,' said Philip Vane faintly, 'and will do what you require.'

'Exactly,' said Mr. Delabole cheerfully. 'We will discuss the matter later. Now, if you please, I will look through the minutes and see what has been going on while I have been away. Mr. Packham,' he called out, putting his head into the outer office, 'be good enough to bring the current minute-book.'

The clerk speedily came with the minute-book and read out many entries to Delabole.

But Philip Vane did not pay much attention to that proceeding. He was entirely engrossed in thinking over what Doctor Asprey had said to him that morning.

CHAPTER V.

MADGE'S CONFESSION.

The news which had been conveyed to her in her sister's letter had a great effect on Madge Pierrepoint. It placed the relation of Rose and Gerald entirely in a different view before her. When the young man, renewing the boy-and-girl acquaintance which had existed between them at Wexeter, had merely been in the habit of paying her sister pretty compliments, and of meeting her now and then in her walks, Madge, quite confident in Rose's strength of mind and knowledge of what was right and proper, was content to let matters be as they were. She remembered Gerald's impulsive manner and the homage which he

was naturally inclined to pay to any pretty girl, and she thought this was merely a flirtation, softened it might be by the recollection of what had passed in those days which seemed now so long away. She had no desire to play the elder sister's part, to warn her of the danger of the course she was pursuing; she knew right well that Rose was perfectly able to take care of herself, and that Gerald was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of any impression which he might make, and she thought that the whole affair would die out as so many hundreds of similar affairs die out daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly, without any permanent harm being done to the persons interested in them.

But when she found that she had been mistaken in her idea, and that the young man had become so fond of her sister as to make her an offer of marriage, and to renew that offer, and insist upon its fulfilment at a time when his worldly prospects were cloudy, and his fortune anything but assuring, Madge deemed it necessary to throw herself into the

breach and to help the young people with all the resources at her command. To say that she did this without a certain amount of struggle and irresolution, without much painful reflection and many tears, would be to say that Madge was not womanly human, and she was very womanly human indeed. As a girl raw and unsophisticated, she had been fascinated by the sham glitter and tawdry sentiment of Philip Vane, but as a woman of the world, young, indeed, but experienced, she had for the first time received that which no woman can ever forget, the undisguised selfless devotion of a fresh young heart which throbs responsive but to one touch, which pulsates but to the dictates of one idol. Gerald Hardinge's was the heart, and she was the idol, in those days now so long ago! And she had abdicated voluntarily, or as it seemed to him voluntarily, and he had taught his heart another allegiance—and it was all for the best!

The circumstances stated in the letter from Rose had placed matters in an entirely

new light. It was no longer a question of lovers' meetings and tender episodes in Kensington Gardens ; Gerald was determined to push his way through the world, taking Rose with him as his companion and his safeguard ; that seemed to be his one hold on life. And Rose, though she did not say so positively, was evidently prepared to share his fate, being only desirous that before their start in life was made, a reconciliation should be effected between Gerald and his father. That was left for her to do, 'and you can do this, Madge, and I know you will. You see the importance of the task I have intrusted to you, and you will throw your whole heart into it.' Madge decided that Rose should not be deceived. She would throw her whole heart into it, and she would succeed. She re-read the letter throughout, smiling somewhat sadly at the reference to the manner in which Gerald employed his leisure while at Wexeter, but laying down the paper with a full determination to do all that was asked of her.

And this determination was not arrived at without a full appreciation of the difficulties to be surmounted, the self-sacrifices to be made. Madge knew she could not broach the subject to Sir Geoffry without representing herself in what was, at least, an unenviable light; without acknowledging her previous intimacy with Gerald Hardinge; without confessing that at the very time the young man was the topic of conversation between them, she had listened to all his father had to say, she had taken her part in the discussion as though its subject had been entirely unknown to her, and had given her suggestions from what one might imagine by her confession to be anything but a disinterested point of view. The whole story of the old life must be raked up again and submitted to the examination of a hard and austere man, who would have but little compunction or compassion for such human frailties as were concerned in it, and whose anger at finding that he had been misled, however unintentionally, would probably induce him

to pursue the course exactly opposite to that which was desired. However, the experiment must and should be made.

Madge was unable to carry her proposed scheme into execution as speedily as she could have wished. The mental excitement involved in his dealings with Messrs. Delabole and Vane, and the subsequent examination of their documents and schemes, seemed to have been a little too much for him. He complained of dizziness and lassitude; his favourite occupation of worrying and dogging the gardener seemed somewhat to have lost its usual charm; he became silent and preoccupied, and for a long time he seemed to shun even the society of Mrs. Pickering, omitting to pay his usual morning visit to the housekeeper's room, and to send for her to read to him in the evening. Madge for her part fell in with the drift of the General's humour, knowing that no slight was intended to herself, and thinking it better that he should be left to recover at his own time and after his own fashion. When this

new state of things, however, had lasted for more than a week, without any sign of change, Madge thought it advisable to send for some physician ; but on the proposition being made to Sir Geoffry, he negatived it promptly and decisively. 'He was quite well, he had never been better in his life; nothing ailed him beyond a slight chill, easily got in this wretched climate at the fall of the leaf. He must beg that Mrs. Pickering would not think of summoning the services of any doctor, who would not understand his constitution, and merely tend to make matters worse.'

But though the old General could and would do without calling in a physician, he very soon found that the pleasant company of his housekeeper had become an absolute necessity to him. After about ten days' solitude, in which he nearly moped himself to death, Sir Geoffry, according to his old custom, knocked at the housekeeper's door, and on being bidden to come in, entered as usual with his formal greeting. He remained but

a very little time in the room, being slightly ill at ease, and obviously afraid that Madge might make some reference to his prolonged absence; but before leaving he expressed his wish that Mrs. Pickering should favour him with her company in the evening, and that their pleasant readings might be resumed

Accordingly, when the General had finished his dinner, Madge repaired to the library, and found Sir Geoffry ready to receive her, the newspapers, cut and folded, were in their usual place, and the book which they had last been reading lay ready to her hand. Madge took her seat and began to read aloud, but after some little time, glancing over at the General, she noticed that his attention was fixed upon the fire, and to her astonishment she noticed the traces of something like tears upon his cheek.

Madge stopped reading, and, recalled to himself by the abrupt cessation, Sir Geoffry made a hasty endeavour to recover his composure.

'Is there anything the matter,' he said,

'that you stopped reading so suddenly, Mrs. Pickering?'

'No,' she replied. 'I did not quite know whether it was agreeable to you.'

'Most certainly,' he replied. 'I should not have asked you to read to me unless—Ah!' he said, with an effort, 'it is useless to continue this. I was inattentive to the reading; I was thinking of something very different. Tell me, Mrs. Pickering, for I know I can trust you to speak frankly to me, do I seem much changed during the last few days?'

'Frankly, then, yes, Sir Geoffry. You have been more than usually quiet, and much less than usually interested about the affairs of the house, and what has been going on around you. You have been very much preoccupied, and still are, I venture to think, a little out of health.'

'I don't know that I am actually ailing, at the present moment,' said the General quietly, 'but I have had a sort of presentiment that I shall not live very long.'

'Sir Geoffry!' interrupted Madge, with a start.

'O, the mere fact of death would not alarm me. One who for so many years has carried his life in his hand is accustomed to look with tolerable calmness on death's approach; but there are one or two matters which I should like to have settled before I die, and when my attention strayed from your reading, I was thinking that I could not do better than discuss them with you.'

A gleam of hope flashed through Madge's brain. Was it not possible that Sir Geoffry, of his own free will, might relieve her of the irksomeness of the task she had undertaken?

'You will recollect, Mrs. Pickering,' said the General, after a pause, 'a conversation which took place between us some short time ago about some—some family matters of mine; you will recollect my telling you of my son, of the reasons which had induced me to exile him from home, and to refuse to receive him when the other day he attempted to effect a reconciliation?'

'I remember it all, perfectly.'

'You did not approve of my behaviour in that matter from first to last?'

'I did not agree with it,' said Madge. 'If I am to speak frankly to you, I will say that your first decision, when it was a question of Mrs. Heriot's conduct, was arrived at when you were much younger and more impulsive than you are now, and was the foundation of a series of errors which you have since carried out. From what I learn from you, your son has acted in a noble and a manly manner throughout, and instead of being ashamed, you ought to be proud of him!'

'I have thought so more than once within the last few days, Mrs. Pickering,' said Sir Geoffry quietly. 'I do not mind making that confession.'

There was a pause for a few moments, after which Madge said:

'I, too, have a confession to make in this matter.'

'You, Mrs. Pickering?'

'I have a confession to make to you, and your pardon to ask, for a certain amount of deception which I have practised towards you.'

'Deception!'

'Nothing more nor less. Do you know what position I held in life before I came into your employ?'

'Captain Cleethorpe told me, but I have almost forgotten. In the telegraph office, were you not?'

'Ay, but before that?'

'I confess I have not an idea.'

'I was an actress in the Wexeter Theatre. In that same theatre where your son was a scene-painter.'

'Good God! had he sunk so low as that? Had he dragged my name so deeply through the mire?'

'You need not fear for your name,' said Madge, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice; 'he had abjured it, as he told you he should, and was known as Mr. Gerald Hardinge. And as for his position there, neither he nor those about him saw anything to be ashamed

of in it. He earned his living honestly, and by the industry and exercise of his talent.'

'Granted,' said Sir Geoffry, biting his lips. 'And now tell me farther. Was he much in your society?'

'We were thrown constantly together.'

'And with the result that might be expected, I suppose? He fell in love with you?'

'He asked me to become his wife, but that was impossible, as at the time I was already married.'

'You already married, and he did not know it?'

'It is not unusual in the theatrical profession for ladies, although they may be married, to retain their maiden name. Such was my case; moreover, as my husband was not an actor, nor in any way connected with the company, Mr. Heriot would have no chance of knowing that I was anything but what I professed to be.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Sir Geoffry stiffly, 'I am not acquainted with the etiquette observed amongst theatrical people.'

'Exactly,' said Madge, 'and that is why I explain it to you.'

'So Mr. Heriot made you an offer of marriage, which you refused?'

'No,' said Madge, 'I did not refuse. There are circumstances in the story which it is unnecessary that I should explain, but which made me think it better to leave the place abruptly, and to give Mr. Heriot no chance of seeing me again.'

'And you did so?'

'I did so, and from that hour to this I have never set eyes upon him.'

'I do not ask you for your reasons, Mrs. Pickering,' said Sir Geoffry, taking Madge's hand and bending over it; 'I am certain they were right and proper ones. To think that you have known George, and that he should have asked you to marry him. Poor George! poor George!'

The tone in which he pronounced these last words was so soft and sad as to inspire Madge with fresh hope.

'There are stranger things to come yet,

Sir Geoffry,' she said. 'George is in love with some one else now.'

'How do you know that? You said you had not seen him since,' said the General quietly.

'From the best of all possible authorities —the lady herself,' said Madge.

'He has not fallen in love with any more actresses, I hope,' said the General. 'I could overlook anything in you, Mrs. Pickering: but I confess it is not from behind the scenes of a theatre that I should wish my daughter-in-law to be selected.'

'You run no risk of that, Sir Geoffry. The young lady in question is my own sister.'

'What, the young lady whom I have heard Cleethorpe and Mr. Drage speak about, who lived for some time with you, and was so pretty and so clever?'

'The same. Gerald—I cannot call him anything else—took great notice of her when she was a child; gave her drawing-lessons, and was very kind to her.'

'That was for her sister's sake,' said the General shortly.

'Undoubtedly; but it seems he has renewed the acquaintance in London, and cares for her entirely for herself. He has outgrown that foolish fancy of his boyhood, and settled down into a sober, serious regard.'

'And does—George—propose to marry your sister?'

'He does. In a letter which I have just had from her, she explains that his earnest wish is that they should be at once married, and emigrate to some distant country, where they can commence a new life.'

'And does he mean to leave England?'

'So I learn from Rose. Since Gerald's last interview with you, he is, she says, quite a changed man. He seems to find it impossible to get over the wrong which has been done him; the treatment which he then experienced. Above all things, he feels the injustice he received at your hands in your suspicion that his story of having discovered his mother's innocence was merely a fabrica-

tion, intended to do him good in your eyes. You bade me speak frankly, Sir Geoffry,' added Madge, looking at the old General, who had fallen back into his previous attitude, and, with his head sunk on his breast and his hands spread out on his knees before him, was glancing vacantly into the fire; 'you bade me speak frankly, and I have done so; I fear to your distress and annoyance.'

'I have brought the distress and annoyance on myself, and must make the best of it. Pray God it has not gone too far! This self-exile that he contemplates, can it be averted?'

'If he knew himself forgiven by you, if he only knew you acknowledged that you had misconstrued his intention in his last attempt to see you, I will answer for your being able to do what you wish with him.'

'What I wish,' said the General, in a low voice, 'is to see him once again before I die.'

'You must not speak in that manner, Sir Geoffry,' said Madge, rising in her seat and bending over his chair. 'I must ask permis-

sion to insist on acting as I proposed some days since, on calling in a physician.'

'He could do me no good,' said the old man. 'I have no illness, no pain, nothing save a strong conviction that my death is close at hand. And that thought would trouble me but little if I could see George again.'

'You shall see him again, and, please Heaven, live many happy years with him, in which all this troublous time shall be forgotten. But I tell you candidly I will not move in the matter, and you know you cannot move without me,' she added with a smile, 'unless you let me send for proper medical advice.'

'Let it be as you wish, my dear,' said the General, 'only recollect what is now the one desire of my life.' And he sank back in his chair and sighed wearily.

Madge had no idea that within a few days he could have become so feeble and so prostrate.

Availing herself of the permission implied

in Sir Geoffry's last words, Madge sent to Dr. Chenoweth, one of the most celebrated physicians at Springside, and asked him to come up to Wheatcroft and see the General. Her selection was made, partly because Dr. Chenoweth was a member of Sir Geoffry's club, and was already on terms of club familiarity with his intended patient; partly because the doctor had the reputation of being so much a man of the world as to believe in nature, rather more than in the pharmacopœia, and inclined to ascribe to diseases a special cause and a special treatment, rather than to generalise verbosely and dogmatically, as was the case with most of his brethren.

Dr. Chenoweth, coming out to Wheatcroft in his trap, found the General seated in the library, moody and preoccupied, as he had been for many days before. Madge at first had an idea that it would be better if the doctor seemed to have dropped in accidentally; but on a little reflection she abandoned this notion, and receiving Dr. Chenoweth in the hall, rapidly explained the state the patient

was in before he saw him. With Sir Geoffry the doctor was closeted some considerable time. Madge, sitting in her own room, with the door open, intent upon seeing him before he went, heard his words of farewell: 'And you will recollect, Sir Geoffry, that, above all, I enjoin upon you the strictest quiet and freedom from all mental disturbance. I will not hear for an instant of your giving your attention to business matters, even of your mixing yourself up with your domestic affairs. You have a prime minister fully competent to deal with them, and in her hands you must leave them. Understand, I have assumed dictator's powers, and I require them to be obeyed. To a military man I know I need amplify no more.'

He closed the door behind him as he spoke, and the next instant was in the passage, where he was confronted by Madge.

'In your room, my dear Mrs. Pickering,' said he, answering her eager look; 'let us go into your room, if you please. In matters of this sort I have learned to distrust giving any

opinion, or even making a remark, in open passages. Now,' he continued, when they had regained her room, and he had motioned her to be seated, 'I am ready to speak freely. Sir Geoffry is in anything but a healthy condition; he has had, if I mistake not, some serious mental worry, which has had its due effect upon him. Am I correct in this supposition?'

'You are. Sir Geoffry has recently had a great deal of anxiety, but he is anxious that it should not be referred to.'

'Like all other people in the same plight. And yet, of course, he keeps on perpetually preying upon it and hugging it to himself. Now this is all very well with hypochondriacs, a class of people with which, my dear Mrs. Pickering, we are not entirely unfamiliar at Springside; but when there is any real disease it is a thing most specially to be guarded against, and I look to you to—'

'Do you mean to say that Sir Geoffry is seriously ill?' asked Madge anxiously.

'I speak to you as a practical woman. I

know that you are one by your look, your earnestness, your very manner of moving about. As such you are entitled to frankness, while the fribbles and dolls of society should receive merely evasion. Sir Geoffry Heriot's heart is seriously affected, and any sudden emotion might be fatal to him.'

Madge, turning deadly white, leaned her hand upon the table to steady herself, then said, 'You speak strongly, Doctor Chenoweth.'

'I speak to you the literal, undisguised truth. I could wrap it up in any form of conversational sweetmeat that might please you. I should do so, if I were addressing most of my *clientèle*, but you are worthy of plainer speaking, and from me you get it.'

'Do you consider Sir Geoffry's life in danger?'

'If any serious news were to be brought suddenly under his notice, most undoubtedly. And I speak thus strongly because, from what you have just said, he is evidently labouring under an excess of mental excitement.'

'Doctor, in the course of your career, you must have been the recipient of many confidences as strange and stranger than that which I am about to make. Sir Geoffry is eager for a reconciliation with his son, from whom by force of circumstances he has been separated for many years. Is it likely that the meeting between the two would be fraught with danger to the General?'

'Under present circumstances with the greatest danger! I would not answer for his life if he were called upon to undergo so great an excitement.'

'Thank you, doctor,' said Madge, after a moment's pause. 'It was important that your advice should be asked. You may be certain that it shall be acted upon.'

'So,' she said to herself, twenty minutes after, when the doctor's swift roans had borne him into Springside, and he was whispering the lightest of nothings into the deafest of ears in the Hot Wells Hotel, 'so ends my plan of immediate reconciliation between father and son. It is plain, from Doctor Chenoweth's

opinion, that Sir Geoffry's strength is not sufficient for him to bear the meeting, and that it must consequently be deferred.'

When, in the course of the afternoon, she commenced talking on the subject with Sir Geoffry, and, approaching it in the most cautious manner, was about to suggest the impossibility of summoning Gerald at once to his father's side, she was surprised to find how completely the General coincided with her view.

'Quite right,' he said, 'quite right. There is nothing that I am so anxious for as to see my boy, and to take him to my arms. But we must wait a little; I am not strong enough to go through much excitement, and I've just had some news which necessitates my placing a rod in pickle for those scoundrels who were here the other day.'

'Scoundrels! what scoundrels?'

'From the Terra del Fuegos mine, my dear. I shall yet be the means of bringing them into the prisoner's dock.'

CHAPTER VI.

COMBINATION AND CONSPIRACY.

Mrs. Entwistle lying on her sofa, which—there being no longer anything worth looking out at—had been moved away from the window and wheeled opposite the fire, was gazing into the glowing coals, and seeing in them dreary scenes, which harmonised with the gloomy state of her mental reflection, for Mrs. Entwistle was in a very low condition of mind and body. Her maid Willis, whose life was rendered a burden to her by the perpetual and always contradictory orders which she was receiving from the invalid, could have vouched for this; and so could Doctor Asprey, who was in such constant request, and had his valuable time so much intruded upon by his eccentric patient that he was compelled to

speak out frankly, and to come to an understanding with her.

'Your guineas, my dear Mrs. Entwistle,' said the great physician blandly, 'are as good to me as any one else's, and if I thought I earned them honestly I should not have the smallest scruple in taking them. Farther, I am bound to say that were I, as I was some years ago, a struggling man, to whom fees are an object, my scruples would trouble me infinitely less than they do now. But the fact is, there is a large number of persons anxious for my advice, to whom I can be of real service, while to you I can do no possible good. Your bodily health is certainly no worse than it was previous to your last attack, no worse, that is to say, in itself. If you suffer yourself to be preyed upon by any mental disquietude, you at once put yourself out of the range of my art. I cannot minister to a mind diseased, my dear Mrs. Entwistle, nor should I presume to suggest to you where you would most probably receive the necessary consolation.'

'Thanks, doctor, for your reticence,' said

Mrs. Entwistle, with a faint smile. 'A man of less *savoir-faire* would certainly have recommended me to apply to the incumbent of the parish. However, my mental disquietude, as you term it, is not of any great moment, and I will take care not to pester you causelessly any more.'

In declaring that the trouble which preyed upon her mind was of no great moment, Mrs. Entwistle scarcely spoke the truth. Ever since she had revealed to Gerald the history of her early days, and of the manner in which, for the sake of gratifying her own longings for vengeance, she had practised upon his father's nascent jealousy, the aspect of life had changed to her. Other persons would have found such a life passed on an invalid's sofa, whence, as she knew well, she would never be carried but to her grave, sufficiently blank and colourless. But from the day on which Gerald Hardinge first took up his abode with her, to that on which she saw the unwonted tear steal down his face, as he listened to the story of his mother's wrongs, the woman,

whom all the world looked upon with pity, and half the world regarded with contempt (that little world which we make for ourselves), had enjoyed a wealth of quiet happiness, such as was granted but to few of her friends.

From that day she dated the decay of her felicity; from the time when she finished speaking to that then present moment, when she lay gazing into the hollow cavern formed out of the glowing embers, Gerald's manner had altered towards her. He was not less affectionate; on the contrary, whenever he was with her she could see that he strove to pay her constant attention, and to be specially loving, both in language and manner, whenever he addressed her. But the young man was changed, changed in every way, and as Mrs. Entwistle earnestly thought—putting herself as much aside as was possible—very much for the worst. The society into which she had introduced him, and in which he had taken such delight, had no longer any charm for him; formerly his absences from

home were comparatively rare, and on his return he would generally bring with him some anecdote of the company in which his time had been passed; now he was away constantly from morning till night, and as regards most of his actions, was silent as the grave.

There was one subject, however, on which Gerald had spoken to his aunt, and spoken frankly. That girl, whose acquaintance he had made when he was amongst those theatrical people, and whom he had met in London on her way to some low employment which she had—he had spoken about her. When he first mentioned his accident of encounter with Rose in the street, narrating at the same time how he had known her as a child, and given her drawing lessons at Wexeter, Mrs. Entwistle gave no hint of objection to his renewal of the acquaintance, but, on the contrary, expressed a wish that Rose should be brought to call upon her, and patronised her, as we have seen. After she had received a visit from the young girl, and noticed her

rare and delicate beauty, her simple self-possession, and the general air of refinement and high breeding which characterised her, more especially after she had marked the effect which these charms had unmistakably produced upon Gerald, it occurred to Mrs. Entwistle that certain relations might eventually arise between the young people, of which she would be supposed to be in ignorance, but which would necessarily prevent her from receiving Miss Pierrepoint in her house. Mrs. Entwistle was a woman of the world, and of that world which nowadays is not reticent in its remarks about matters which our ancestors discreetly ignored; so she took an opportunity of mentioning what she had in her mind to Gerald, and received a reply which, both in words and meaning, was stronger and sterner than anything which she had yet heard from his lips. Mrs. Entwistle shrugged her shoulders; her nephew was a purist, she supposed, and the young men of the present day, if he were to be taken as an example, were notably different from those of her time. His friend-

ship with this young girl was, she supposed, one of those queer fancies which were part and parcel of his artistic nature, the chivalrous manner in which he treated her, the way in which he managed to give up his time for her education and mental improvement; all this was inexplicable to Mrs. Entwistle. It never occurred to her for one moment that George Heriot, no longer an outcast, but though not yet restored to his position and his name, yet well placed before the world as her adopted heir, could ever intend to offer marriage to Rose Pierrepoint, an unknown person, who earned her living by her own labour, and when Gerald announced to her that he had proposed, and been accepted by this same 'young person,' and was only awaiting the result of his interview with his father to carry the project into execution, Mrs. Entwistle was furious. It is probable that in her rage she might have ordered her nephew to quit the house, had not Gerald in the same speech announced to her, with all expressions of gratitude for her past kindness, his intention of

being solely self-reliant for the future, and of seeking his fortune in a foreign country. Then the love for the boy, which had been growing up for the last few years, increasing year by year as his manhood developed, more than the promise of his youth, asserted itself with fullest force, and in the bitterness of her despair at the idea of parting from him, the proud woman humbled herself to pour forth a plaint which no one could have listened to unmoved. Why should his marriage, which ought to be a joy to them both, prove a source of sorrow to her? What necessity was there for him to go away? Could he not bring his wife to that house, which for years he had looked upon as his home, where she should be received as a daughter, and of which she should be made the mistress? Ah, would he not wait by her a very, very little time longer, until — until — and then her voice broke, and Gerald, profoundly touched, whispered that her wishes should be obeyed.

But when this excited emotion, which lasted for a very short period with Mrs. Entwistle,

had passed away, she found herself not one whit more inclined to approve of what she held to be her nephew's intention of *mésalliance*, not one atom more friendly disposed towards the person of his choice. She felt herself in duty bound to request Gerald to bring Rose constantly to her house, by which means she herself saw far more of her nephew than she otherwise would have done. For the love-making between Gerald and Rose at this period of their career was by no means so offensive as such proceedings are generally supposed to be; and their meetings were usually held in Mrs. Entwistle's boudoir, where they sat by the side of the invalid's sofa. Mrs. Entwistle had bitterly opposed Gerald's plan for going down to Springside, and acquainting his father with the details of the story which she had told him, not merely because it would incense Sir Geoffry against her and place her character in a most disadvantageous light, and as for that she cared nothing, but the result of the interview, whatever it might be, might have the effect of

hastening his marriage. For if Sir Geoffry, believing what was told him, and repenting of his former rigorous conduct, clasped his son to his heart and reinstated him in his position, he would be too glad in the excess of his joy to agree to anything his son wished, and to accept as daughter-in-law no matter who might be proposed. While, on the other hand, should the attempt at reconciliation prove a failure, there was the chance that Gerald, in his fury, would instantly ally Rose's fate with his own, and forgetful of the promise which he had made to remain with his aunt until her death, would start off with his wife to seek their fortune in a new land. And although her fears had not been verified, Mrs. Entwistle was still not without alarm. She had seen how much Gerald had taken to heart the rebuff and the insult he had received. She had noticed — she could not help noticing and grieving over—the change in his appearance and manner, the loss of the fire and energy which formerly characterised his every thought and movement, the dull, moody, brooding state

into which he had fallen, and from which even Rose's companionship failed to rouse him. He had told her—for in all his communications with her Gerald was consistently frank—that his one great aim in life was to be reconciled to his father, that he had told Rose as much, and that she had given him fresh hope. It appeared that Rose—how, or through whom, she would not say—had the means of bringing certain influence to bear upon Sir Geoffry Heriot, and this influence was to be strongly exercised in Gerald's favour.

Mrs. Entwistle being really in her heart extremely doubtful of the existence of any such power as that described by her nephew, at first endeavoured to inveigle Rose into a discussion in which a judicious series of cross-questioning might either have exposed the pretence, or elicited from her the source and means of her influence with Sir Geoffry. Finding this to be a total failure, and utterly discomfited by the quiet manner in which the girl parried all her attacks, Mrs. Entwistle was reduced to uttering small scraps of sar-

castic doubt, and even of these she was compelled to be chary in her nephew's presence.

See her now, stretched out on the sofa, her head thrown back, her thin hand still clasping the light fire-screen, fallen passively by her side. Doctor Asprey may be right; that dull dead-white complexion, those hollow cheeks, those puckered lips, may belong to what has become her normal state, but it is a gruesome aspect nevertheless, and one suggestive of dire illness, if not of immediately impending dissolution, to the uninitiated beholder.

A light firm step in the passage outside, and hearing it the invalid at once changes her attitude, manages by an effort to prop herself into a less recumbent position, and takes up a book which she had let fall by her side on the sofa. A vain pretence this, as she recognises immediately by putting it back again, the dusk having supervened since she fell into her reverie, and there being no longer daylight sufficient to read by. Onward comes the footstep, and her brow grows more stern. Her eyes are closed when the door opens, remain

closed until the incoming figure, Rose Pierrepoint, dressed in a neat hat and veil with a long dark cloak, is standing beside her.

Then she opens them wearily, says wearily, 'It is you—Rose?' with a marked hesitation before the utterance of the christian name.

'It is I, Mrs. Entwistle! I feared to disturb you, as I thought you were asleep.'

'No, I read until I could see no longer, and then I closed my eyes, principally, I fancy, to keep myself from glaring into the fire and seeing uncomfortable visions there. You have brought Gerald with you?'

'No, I thought to find him here.'

'Have you any news for him?' asked the invalid, suddenly turning her face towards her companion.

'None at all,' said the young girl, shaking her head, sadly.

'Then your mysterious influence, the secret of which you guard so jealously, has not yet been able to prevail upon Sir Geoffry to grant his son that interview upon which Gerald counts so much?'

'No, it has not.'

'"It,"' repeated Mrs. Entwistle, with a sarcastic inflection of her voice. 'Your prudence, especially for so young a person, is quite wonderful. By saying "it," you commit neither yourself nor any one else. If any other man than Geoffry Heriot had been in question, I would have wagered you had said "she."'

'I am forbidden to state the means by which I am in hopes of winning Sir Geoffry to our side, and as you are aware, Mrs. Entwistle, Gerald, who is equally ignorant as everybody else about them, absolves me from telling him.'

'I am aware of that, Rose,' said Mrs. Entwistle, with a repetition of her former hesitation, 'and I am sure I do not desire to press you upon the subject. It will be sufficient for us to know the name of our benefactor when—well, when we have derived any benefit from it.'

At this juncture Gerald entered the room, and after bending over his aunt's sofa, and

greeting Rose, he threw himself into a chair, and sat with his hands plunged into his pockets, silent and moody, waiting to be spoken to, so unlike the Gerald Hardinge of a few months previous.

'It is useless to ask you whether you have any news, Gerald, I suppose?' said Mrs. Entwistle.

'None at all,' he replied. 'No news now would have any interest to me, unless it came through Rose here, and I know she has none, or she would have rushed at me with it directly she came in.'

'You judge rightly, Gerald,' said Rose. 'I have heard nothing—nothing at all.'

'Our dear Rose's oracle takes a long time for deliberation,' said Mrs. Entwistle, clipping out the words between her lips. 'Let us trust that when it is induced to speak its utterances may be favourable.'

'Whether it speaks or not, matters very little to me now,' said Gerald. 'Not, dear one,' he added, extending his hand to Rose, 'that I mean to be in the least degree unkind

to you. I know all that you have done has been for the best, and in the belief that you would be able to carry out all you hoped. But I find that I cannot exist under this mental pressure any longer, and I fear, unless some result, no matter whether favourable or unfavourable, be speedily arrived at, my mind will give way. There is no torture, to me, at least, to equal this agony of suspense.'

'What do you propose to do, then?' asked Mrs. Entwistle anxiously.

'To make one more effort to see my father, and set myself right with him. If I succeed, my one aim in life will be accomplished; if I fail, I shall be able to settle myself down with the conviction that I, as a mortal, had done my best, and that the fates were against me.'

'Will you not let me try once more to see whether I cannot help you?' said Rose; 'I am sure that—'

'I am sure that you have done all you can, my dear child, and that any farther

attempt would be useless. Indeed, I would rather come upon my father, taking him as unprepared even as I did last time, than that he should imagine I was currying favour with his friends to influence him in my behalf.'

'If you would take the advice of one who has seen much more of the world than you, and who knows the tempers of men in general, and of Geoffry Heriot in particular,' said Mrs. Entwistle, 'you will think twice before you act on that determination. So far as you are aware, nothing has transpired since your previous visit to your father to warrant you in anticipating any better reception than you then experienced. We, who are devoted to you, Rose and I, can judge of the effect which that former visit had upon you. You cannot yourself pretend to be ignorant of, you cannot pretend to deny that since then you are a completely changed man, and you owe it as much to us as well as to yourself, to think over and weigh well what might be the result of a repetition of such insults.'

While she was speaking these words, Mrs. Entwistle managed to raise herself upon her elbow, and emphasised her speech with telling gesture. Her cheeks were flushed, and her voice rang out in tones such as Gerald had never heard it utter. When, as she ceased speaking, she fell back faint with the exertion, Gerald rose from his chair, and quickly crossing the room, caught her in his arms and pressed his lips upon her forehead.

'I should be base, indeed,' he said, 'if I did not recognise and appreciate the loving kindness which not merely prompts those words, but which has watched over and nurtured me so long. But I have thought over all you have just desired me to reflect upon, I have pictured to myself the scene which you have raised up before me, and I still think it right to go through with the task which I have set myself, and to attempt at least to perform what I still conceive to be my duty. If I fail, we three shall not be the less strongly knit together. If I succeed—'

'If you succeed, you will regain your

father's love, but you will not permit him, however much cause he may have, to teach you to hate me,' said Mrs. Entwistle in a broken voice. 'You will have to bear with me for such a very little time.'

'I am not likely to forget,' said Gerald, kissing her cheek, 'that when I was forsaken by him, you proved my friend.'

'When do you intend going to Springside, Gerald?' asked Rose.

'If your friend is not able to gain me an interview this week, which I fear there is now little chance, I shall certainly go on Monday next.'

'Monday next,' repeated Rose to herself, 'that would give me plenty of time to write again to Madge, if she felt that her intercession could now do us any good.'

Just about the time that Gerald Hardinge announced his determination to his two companions, Mr. Philip Vane rang at the outer door of the house in Piccadilly in which Mr. Delabole's chambers were situate. Admitted

by the hall-porter, who rang a bell on hearing for whom inquiry was made, Mr. Vane ascended to the first-floor, where he was received by Fritz, and informed that Mr. Delabole expected him. The valet added that his master was dressing for dinner, but that he had given orders to be told of Mr. Vane's arrival.

Indeed, Philip Vane had scarcely seated himself in an easy-chair, and taken up the evening paper, in which he turned by force of habit to the money article (though he had come straight from the City, and was probably at least as well informed about what had been going on there as the writer), when Mr. Delabole's jolly voice was heard from the inner room; and Fritz having opened the door of communication, Philip passed through and found his friend in a gorgeous dressing-room, with his short black hair standing straight on end awaiting the attention of the valet.

'What a luxurious dog it is!' said Philip Vane sardonically, after he and his friend had

exchanged greetings. 'He is absolutely too rich and too idle to brush his own hair!'

'Not at all, dear boy, not at all,' said Mr. Delabole. 'He is never too rich or too idle to comb anybody else's hair, if he thinks they want it done for them, and to use a particularly small-toothed rasper for the occasion. As for his own hair, the manliness of his figure is so much developed, that he finds he cannot get conveniently at the back of his head, and is obliged to call in artificial aid.'

'You sent me a line to the City, saying you wished to see me here. I presume you have something of more importance than your hair to talk to me about?'

'My hair is of the utmost importance to me, my dear Philip,' said Mr. Delabole placidly, 'but I do not expect you to take equal interest in it. That will do, Fritz; if you will put out the rest of the things I shall not want you any more. Now,' he continued, when the valet had left the room, 'I can tell you what I wanted to see you about, as it is not my habit to chatter before servants. You

recollect the conversation we had at the office immediately after my return from my little country trip?'

'I am not likely to forget it,' said Philip Vane.

'You will recollect my mentioning to you the necessity of our getting Mr. Irving to join us, and the impossibility of our doing so unless he saw his friend Sir Geoffry Heriot's signature to our registered Memorandum of Association?'

'I recollect it perfectly.'

'That signature is not yet there, I think,' said Mr. Delabole, pausing in the act of tying his cravat, and looking round at his friend.

'See here, Delabole,' said Philip Vane, under his breath. 'Do you know what you are asking me to do?'

'To help yourself to a handsome wife with sixty thousand pounds. Nothing farther that I know of.'

'You have a hold over me in that matter, and you know it,' said Vane, 'but be careful how you—'

'Doctor Asprey is at the door,' said Fritz. 'Will you see him?'

'By all means,' said Mr. Delabole. 'Show him up.' Then turning to Vane, he said, 'Mind you sit him out. This matter must be decided to-night. Well, Doctor, how are you, and where do you bring all that dust from?'

'From the Great Western Railway, generally,' said Doctor Asprey, who looked tired and travel-stained: 'I just looked in on my way home from the station to see if you were going to dine at the half-yearly audit of the Friendly Grasp to-morrow?'

'Certainly,' said Mr. Delabole. 'We shall meet there. But where have you come from?'

'From Springside. My old fellow-student, Chenoweth, who was with me at St. Vitus, and is now in leading practice at Springside, telegraphed to me for a consultation, and I went down yesterday.'

'Who is your patient, Doctor?'

'An old Indian officer, a certain Sir Geoffry Heriot. A man of mark in his time,

I believe, though his time is nearly over now.'

'You consider it a bad case, then?'

'Couldn't well be worse. Cannot possibly live more than a few days, heart disease and other complications. Well, I must be going, we shall meet to-morrow. Good-night, Mr. Vane.' And the Doctor took his departure.

'You heard what he said,' said Delabole, as soon as the door had closed; 'the old man cannot live. This reduces the risk to nil. The signature would be supposed to have been obtained while we were at Springside. Luckily there was no lawyer, nor any one else in Sir Geoffry's confidence. Do you see your way to it now?'

'Certainly more clearly than I did,' said Philip Vane, in a firm voice.

CHAPTER VII.

A CRISIS.

On the morning after the dinner given by the directors of the Friendly Grasp Insurance Office, on the occasion of their half-yearly audit, at which Doctor Asprey and Mr. Delabole had been present, the last-named gentleman, attired in a gorgeous dressing-gown and meandering between his bedroom and his sitting-room, now and then making a slight addition to his toilet, now and then taking stray snatches of breakfast from the well-laden table, and all the time glancing at the newspaper which he carried about with him, suddenly saw the end of a letter sticking out from the rack which formed the usual receptacle for his correspondence in his absence.

'Strange,' said Mr. Delabole, laying aside

the newspaper and advancing towards the rack, 'that I did not notice this last night. It must have been there, but I must have overlooked it in my eagerness to get at Irving's reply. From my dear Philip, eh! Now, what can he want?' he muttered, as he tore open the envelope and hastily perused its contents.

Mr. Delabole's eyebrows, at first uplifted, then contracted, betokened astonishment and dissatisfaction at what he read. 'Two or three days away from London, and he's to be married to-morrow week, and to travel for at least a month. What can take him away just now? You're a slippery customer, Master Philip,' continued Mr. Delabole, shaking his head as he apostrophised his absent friend, 'a very slippery customer! And yet what a clever fellow! What an admirable notion that was of getting Asprey to insist on old Heriot's people to keep from the invalid all letters and telegrams, anything touching on business matters! That secures us from any chance of discovery during the next few days,

which are all-important. Irving has now been informed that his friend has signed the memorandum of association, thereby testifying to his belief in the soundness of the concern. He will probably write or telegraph at once to Springside, but neither his letter nor his message will be shown to his friend. In forty-eight hours, perhaps, in a week at farthest, according to Asprey's idea, old Heriot will be dead. His illness will be sufficient excuse for his not having replied to his friend's inquiry, and Mr. Irving will stand committed to the subscription of a good round sum to prop the falling fortunes of the Terra del Fuegos mine.

'That cutting off the invalid from all communication with the outside world was Vane's idea, and the signature — how admirably it was done! but Master Philip must not think that I am paid in full, or that I intend to make no farther use of that information which I was lucky enough to obtain. Now that he has done what I require he shall marry the widow without any unpleasant suggestion on

my part of Miss What's-her-name, the actress, and the Chepstow register. But when he returns to town I shall have to talk to him like a parent about the investment of Mrs. Bendixen's sixty thousand pounds. Meanwhile I wonder what can take him away just now? I will send for Gillman, and—By Jove! I had forgotten it was Sunday!' he cried, as the ringing of the church bells broke upon his ear; 'Sunday, when Gillman is probably enjoying his domestic felicity at Camden Town, and would object to being disturbed. However, I will send for him to-morrow morning, and put him on the scent again.'

Mr. Delabole's guess as to the manner in which Mr. Gillman was spending his Sabbath was not entirely correct. In an ordinary way Mr. Gillman was in the habit of devoting himself to his family on a Sunday, and spending the morning in washing himself—a proceeding which, with him, was not daily but hebdomadal; getting rid of the growth of a straggling but stubborn beard, putting on his Sunday suit, consisting of swallow-tail black

coat, rusty black trousers, and black satin waistcoat very much frayed at the pockets, and his Sunday shirt, which was exuberant in waving collar and bulging breast, but fell short in the matter of wristband. Thus magnificently arrayed, Mr. Gillman, after presiding over the one o'clock dinner, and smoking a long clay pipe, as he indoctrinated himself with the politics of the Sunday newspaper, and glowed with delight as he read the fulminations of Brutus against a dissipated aristocracy, would take the children for a very wretched and melancholy walk, from which they would all return draggled, and wearied, and cross; and Mr. Gillman would not recover his equanimity until, the children having been duly slapped and sent to bed, he and Mrs. G. would settle down to a quiet 'bit of supper' and a glass of 'something hot,' over which they would discuss their family and their neighbours until bedtime.

This, however, was an extraordinary occasion. It was, indeed, one o'clock, and on a Sunday; but instead of being at home, dis-

pensing portions of the baked shoulder of mutton, and the potatoes swimming beneath it in a brown dish, Mr. Gillman was seated in an up-stairs room of the Dog and Duck at Mortlake, an untouched glass of ale and a clean pipe on the table before him. Mr. Gillman was in his working-day suit, which was merely a shabby repetition of his Sabbath garb, minus the black satin waistcoat. He was engaged on a secret mission when it was most important that he should not be recognised, but though his whole life was passed in spying and dogging, in listening and marking down, Mr. Gillman never condescended to the adoption of disguise. He had a very mean opinion of the detective police in general, and of their conduct in such matters in particular. 'What is the use,' he would remark, 'of a policeman dressing up himself as a butcher or cabman, or what not? He don't get rid of his policeman's hands, does he? he don't get rid of his policeman's feet, does he? You could swear to both of 'em anywhere, just as if they were in berlins and bluchers. Besides,

if you don't want to be seen don't show yourself, leastways to make any mark. "Did you see any one go by?" perhaps they ask. "Yes," says you, having noticed, "I saw a butcher or a cabby." No one can tell what I am; all they could say is, "I saw a man, and not much of that neither." '

Mr. Gillman's companion, however—for he was not alone—evidently did not entertain the same idea. When he first entered the room his wideawake hat was pulled down over his brow, the collar of his coat was pushed up over his ear, and it was not until he had looked round and ascertained, without doubt, that they were quite alone, that he emerged from his wrappings, and showed the somewhat worn and anxious features of Mr. Philip Vane.

The conference between this worthy pair had been long, and, on Philip Vane's part, animated. He had asked his questions impetuously, cogitated over the replies, and expressed his determination with a vehemence which seemed to awake no response in Mr.

Gillman's quiet little frame. Drawing hieroglyphical figures with the stem of the empty pipe on the beer-stained table before him, Mr. Gillman sat, never speaking only when he was spoken to, and then packing his reply into the smallest possible compass.

'And that was the last time you heard of her?' asked Philip Vane, after a pause of some minutes' duration.

'The very last,' replied Mr. Gillman.

'Employed in the telegraph-office at Springside?'

'Exactly; she and her sister got in there through the influence of a clergyman, name of—' And Mr. Gillman began fumbling in his pockets for his memorandum-book.

'Never mind his name,' interrupted Vane, 'I don't want that now. All this coincides exactly with my own ideas upon the subject.'

'I shall have a spare day or two this week, Mr. V., I expect,' said Gillman, 'and I could run down to Springside if you wish it, and—'

'No, not the slightest occasion for you to

do that. You have brought the inquiry to a conclusion which is perfectly satisfactory to me. And there,' laying the note on the table, 'are the ten pounds which I promised you.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Gillman, taking up the note and folding it away in a recess of his greasy pocket-book. 'You have kept your word in this, I look to you to keep it in the other matter.'

'What other matter?'

'Regarding keeping it from our governor that I have been working for you in this matter. I would not have it known to Mr. D. for ten times ten pounds. It is not so much the "sack," which I should receive prompt, directly minute; but it is the unforgiving nature of that man, which I know, and the harm he would do me throughout the rest of my life.'

'You need not fear, Mr. G—'

'Beg pardon; best not to name names in public-houses,' interrupted Gillman.

'You need not fear. It suited our friend to employ you to make inquiries respecting

a certain portion of my family history; it suited me to pay you to issue a second edition of your discoveries for my especial behoof. I am not likely to see much of Mr. D., as you call him, for some time to come, and I certainly should not think of saying anything which would render your position with him less confidential than it is. And now, I don't think I need detain you any longer.'

Business being thus pronounced to be at an end, Mr. Gillman thought himself at liberty to drink the ale, which he did at one long draught, and, putting on a very shiny and napless hat, took his leave of his patron and departed.

'That was ten pounds well spent,' said Philip Vane, as he started on his return to town in the hansom cab which had brought him down, and had been waiting for him some little distance up the road. 'The information picked up by that fellow completely coincides with what flashed into my mind about Madge, directly her name was mentioned by the parson at Springside. Springside—how curiously

that place has become associated with me! First, in connection with that old Heriot, and now with Madge. Bah!' he continued, repressing a shudder, 'I hate to think of that business. So long as the old man is alive, the merest allusion to him, the place where he lives, or the infernal company, sends a shiver through me. If Asprey had not given such an account of him, I would never—there, it's no use dwelling on that. It is easy enough now to understand how this parson had established such an influence over Madge as to induce her to confide that neat little episode in her life to him. It seems that he obtained for her the position by which she was enabled to make her living; so there is no wonder in her being grateful and confiding, and all that sort of thing. Now, my course is pretty plain before me. There are three persons possessed of information, by disclosing which they could, if they chose, prevent my marriage, or annul it after it had taken place, and get me two years' hard labour. One of these, and the most dangerous, is Delabole;

but I have squared him, and closed his mouth by—doing what he wished. The other two, Madge and the parson. And of these, I look upon Madge as far the most important. When the parson confronted me the other day, he was evidently acting on Madge's behalf, not, I should say, under instructions from her, but in that sort of chivalrous spirit which influences such men. Any appeal I make must be made to Madge direct, and must not come through him. He would not hear of any compromise, and it would be impossible for him in his position not to take notice of a direct infraction of the law. He is but a poor creature mentally, if one may judge from the manner in which he was hoodwinked by my sudden penitence on the only occasion of our meeting. When I go to Springside to-morrow, my first inquiry must be for him. I must ask him where Madge is to be found, leading him to think that I am thoroughly sorry for having been a naughty boy, and wish to come back to her and to live happy ever after. When I find out where Madge is, and get her by her-

self out of Mr. Drage's range, there will not, I think, be much difficulty in dealing with her. Whatever affection she may have had for me—and there is no doubt she was deuced fond of me at one time—must have passed away, so that will be no obstacle to her going abroad. She was always ambitious, and if I agree to give her a handsome allowance, or the money down—that's a better plan—and she hears that she can live in luxury and comfort, on condition that she does not allow herself to be betrayed in making any more confidences such as she made to her clerical friend, and keeps herself thoroughly to herself, I think there is very little doubt that she will agree. At all events, as Mrs. Bendixen is within a very few days to become Mrs. Philip Vane, it is quite time some steps were taken in regard to the lady who now holds that title.'

The autumnal sun, without much warmth in it to be sure, but doing its best to make things look bright and cheerful, was shining

over Springside in the early afternoon of the next day, and tempting the strongest of the invalids, who may have made it their head-quarters for the winter, into the streets. There was a little more excitement than usual in Springside, for it was 'mail morning,' and nearly all the inhabitants of the Indian colony there located had received letters, the generally interesting news of which they were anxious to discuss with their common friends. On such occasions the club was certain to be filled with a chattering, argumentative crowd, and it was incumbent on every Springside settler to take down his budget of gossip and contribute it to the general stock.

Captain Cleethorpe, in whom long years of home residence had not in the least cooled his love for the East, and his interest in Indian affairs, had long taken the lead in the discussions which cropped up on such occasions. But when Sir Geoffry Heriot joined the colony, the Captain, with a good grace, yielded to his senior officer the position which

the latter's age, experience, and clear-headed common sense enabled him to hold against all comers. Indeed, after a very short time, the old General's impetuosity of manner, and sharp caustic bits of conversation, grew to be so much relished, that the chance of his attendance at the club was held up as an attraction, and many an invalid, whom nothing else would ever have induced to venture out, wrapped himself in wondrous mufflers, and braved the night air, on the chance of hearing 'old Heriot tackle a griff.'

The news that the old General was seriously ill had spread a gloom over this day's meeting, and even those who had been most opposed to him in argument, on social and political questions, joined in lamenting his absence and its cause, acknowledging, as they did, that, though censorious and irritating, he was always a perfectly honourable and gentlemanly opponent. True it was that the arrival in their midst of Captain Cleethorpe, who had come straight from Wheatcroft,

with the news that there was a decided improvement in Sir Geoffry's condition that day —so great an improvement that he intended getting up and sitting in the library for some hours—had a cheering influence on the assemblage. But the old man's absence was most noticeable ; a dozen occasions arose on which, as it was felt by most present, he would have dashed in with some trenchant remarks, which would have had the effect of changing the whole line of the argument. On Captain Cleethorpe, especially, this feeling fell with fullest force; he owned to himself that he was dull and dispirited, and impressed with a consciousness of an impending something which he could not explain. He was glad that he had brought the mare into town. Instead of going straight home to the Bungalow, he would take a stiffish ride round the country in the hope of thus driving away this attack of low spirits.

So the Captain, admirably got up after his neat, trim, soldierly fashion, and looking infinitely better, sounder, and more lovable than

many a youngster of half his age, went rambling through the streets, jauntily returning the salutations which showered upon him from right and left, in evidence of his popularity. He had passed the boundary of the town, and was crossing the road near a little sub-station of the railway, within some three miles of the principal terminus, when a man, suddenly emerging from the narrow lane leading to the station, caused the mare to swerve, and her owner to be grateful for the possession of an excellent cavalry seat. It did not take the Captain an instant to recover himself, and as he patted the mare's neck and gentled her, he looked round for the cause of the commotion.

This was a tall, bright-looking young man, well set up, and of springy, active step, who advanced towards the horseman, and was raising his hat, apparently about to apologise for the disturbance which he had involuntarily created, but as he approached nearer to discern the features of the gentleman whom he was about to address, he hesitated, stopped,

and then, without saying a word, pulled his hat over his eyes and strode rapidly away.

The Captain gazed after him in extreme wonderment, not unmixed with disgust. He was very punctilious in his notions of breeding and behaviour, and though there had been no necessity for an apology, yet for the young man to come forward merely to scowl and disappear, was a breach of manners of which Captain Cleethorpe did not at all approve.

'The man must be mad,' Cleethorpe muttered to himself, looking after the rapidly retreating figure, 'or what on earth can have induced him to rush away like that, as soon as he recognised me? For he did recognise me, I am sure of that, and that was the cause of his trouble. Couldn't be one of my quarter-sessions friends? That young fellow was too well looking, too frank and bright for a jail bird. Too—stay—where have I seen that face before? somewhere, I'll be sworn. That expression of pain and trouble which flitted

across it for an instant seemed quite familiar to me. Now let me think this out quietly.'

And the Captain turned round easily in his saddle, and, checking the mare to a walk, fell into a train of reflection which lasted some little time. At last he seemed to find the sought-for clue, he raised his head, brought his whip-hand down upon his thigh with a smack that startled the mare into a canter, and never drew rein until he overtook a lady walking along the road, who, turning quickly round as Captain Cleethorpe pulled up beside her, proved to be Mrs. Pickering.

'The very person of all others I most wished to see,' said the Captain, raising his hat. 'Will you permit me, my dear Mrs. Pickering, to walk beside you for a short distance, for I have something of real importance to talk to you about.'

As he spoke he jumped nimbly from the saddle, and hanging the bridle over his arm, commenced walking by her side.

'Your manner is somewhat alarming, Captain Cleethorpe,' said Madge, with a sad smile.

'I trust you have no farther bad news to tell me? Sir Geoffry's illness is about as much as we can bear just now.'

'No, I won't say bad news, but something odd and strange has happened which you ought to hear of. You recollect your asking me some time ago whether our old friend Sir Geoffry had any family?'

'Yes, yes!'

'And my mentioning that he had a boy who had—who had—in point of fact gone to grief? Well, Mrs. Pickering, that boy, now grown into a young man, I saw not ten minutes ago.'

'Here?' said Madge faintly. 'You saw him here in this place?'

'Here!' repeated the Captain, 'coming down from the railway close by Abbott's Farm.'

'O, Captain Cleethorpe!' cried Madge, laying her hand upon his arm, 'would you mind riding back and seeing if you can overtake this young man? He is doubtless down here with the intention of seeing his father, and it

is all-important that any meeting between them should be prevented, at all events, just now. You will help me in trying to stop this?'

'My dear Mrs. Pickering, I would do anything in the world to serve you or Sir Geoffry, only I should like to know—'

'Don't wait an instant now, you shall know all some other time.'

And the Captain feigned to be content, raised his hat in adieu, jumped on to the mare, and cantered off.

'No, sir, Mr. Drage has not returned,' said the Rector's neat little maid to a stranger, inquiring somewhat later on the same afternoon at the rectory gate. 'I'm not sure, sir, but I think he's gone up to Wheatcroft.'

'Wheatcroft, eh?' said the stranger. 'Sir Geoffry Heriot's place, isn't it?'

'Yes, if you please, sir,' said the little maid, half awed, half fascinated by the great black beard and brilliant teeth on which she was gazing. 'Sir Geoffry's much better to-

day, sir, and I heard Mr. Drage say he should go up and have a chat with him.'

'Thank you, good-day,' said the stranger, turning away. 'Much better, is he? that's not good hearing. However, I suppose Asprey could not be wrong in his diagnosis, and this sudden improvement in the old gentleman is but one of those flashes which so frequently precedes total extinction. What a confounded nuisance that this parson should be away from home just when I wanted him. I must see him, for I must learn from him where to find Madge. He is probably the only person who could give me that information, and even if she were still in this place, which I very much doubt, it would not do for me to be poking about and asking questions which might elicit unpleasant inquiries. The old gentleman would not be up to much conversation, and I should think that he and Drage must have had it all out by this time. I'll walk up towards Wheatcroft and meet the parson on his way back.'

So Mr. Philip Vane, for it was he, strode

leisurely away. The rectory was situate in the outskirts of the town, and on that autumnal evening there were but few chance passers-by. Yet Mr. Philip Vane thought it advisable to diverge from the high road, and climbing a gate, to proceed along a narrow, beaten track on the other side of the edge, keeping at the same time a sharp look-out for the person whom he expected to meet. He was annoyed when he found himself getting close to Wheatcroft without having seen any sign of Mr. Drage. The train by which he was to return to London would start in an hour, and unless he made good use of his time now, his expedition would have been in vain. He thought he would go up to the house, where Mr. Drage had probably been detained. There was no chance of his seeing Sir Geoffry, who would doubtless be confined to his room, nor was it probable that any of the servants, even if they saw him, would recognise him in the dusk.

He leaped a light fence, which separated the field he had been traversing from the

Wheatcroft grounds, and passing through a young and struggling plantation, came upon the lawn in front of the house. The blinds were all down, and no light shone from any window. All was dull and blank and death-like. Philip Vane shrugged his shoulders, and muttering, 'Cheerful this' to himself, stole quietly round the angle of the house.

In an instant he found himself in the full blaze of a moderator lamp, standing on a table in the window. In an instant he heard a thin querulous voice call out,

'Halloo, you sir! Come here!'

Philip Vane looked up, and saw Sir Geoffry Heriot sitting in an easy chair by the French window, one half of which was open. The old man's face was very pale, but his eyes were blazing, and his outstretched hand trembled visibly.

'Halloo, you sir! Come here!' he repeated.

'What's the matter, Sir Geoffry?' said Vane, stepping into the room. 'You must have forgotten whom you are addressing by your tone.'

'Not at all, I know who you are, and I am glad you have come, for you have saved me the trouble of sending for you.'

'Sending for me? Did you want me, Sir Geoffry?'

'Not I, sir, but the police, whom I was about to instruct to arrest you.'

'The police! You're an old man, Sir Geoffry, and an invalid, but if you recover you shall answer for this insult.'

'Not I, sir; no code will compel me to go out with a swindler and a forger! Here is Irving's letter, here—no, you shall not escape if I can only reach the bell.'

Weak and shattered as he was, the old man staggered from his seat and threw himself upon Vane, who had turned to the open window. The remains of those nerves of steel, which had gained him so much renown in the old days and enabled him to undergo so many hardships, had not entirely deserted Sir Geoffry, for his grasp was riveted on his antagonist, and Vane found it impossible to shake it off. Twice Vane struck the upturned

face with his clenched fist, until it was streaming with blood; but the old man still held on. At length Vane, freeing one hand, seized Sir Geoffry's loose neckcloth and twisted it round and round. At the first motion of his wrist the old man's strength suddenly relaxed, and with a groan he fell backwards.

Shaking himself free, Vane darted towards the window, but recoiled in horror as he saw his wife standing in the open air, and looking on with terror-stricken eyes.

His hesitation, however, was but for an instant, and he rushed straight at the window, pushing Madge aside and flinging her to the ground with stunning force, and tore across the lawn to the point at which he had entered the plantation. So far no one had followed him. While crossing the lawn he had seen the dim outline of a figure making its way up the carriage sweep; but it had taken no notice of him, and probably, indeed, not seen him. So far, then, he was safe.

The man whom Philip Vane had noticed in the carriage sweep strode steadily on until

he reached the plateau on which the house stood, when he paused and looked round. The flood of light from the open window attracted his attention, and he crept towards it. Suddenly he came upon the prostrate figure of a woman, and looking beyond saw a sight calculated to frighten a stouter heart than his. Springing into the room, he gently raised Sir Geoffry's body in his arms, and was about to attempt to lay it on the couch, when the door behind him was thrown open. He heard the shouting of men and the screaming of women, felt himself suddenly pinioned, and a strong rough hand at his neck. The lamp had been overturned in the hubbub, but some of the servants had candles with them, and one of the men called for a light to look at the ruffian. But after he had raised the candle up to his captive's face, he let it drop to the ground, as he cried in heart-piercing tones:

'Ah, wirra, wirra, Masther George!'

CHAPTER VIII.

ABANDONED.

Two hours after the event just narrated the household at Wheatcroft began to settle down into something like order again. True that here and there in the passages were still to be seen two or three women gathered together in knots, some weeping, some gesticulating, all talking. True that in the servants' hall a group comprising the gardeners, grooms, and out-door servants of the establishment, partly paralysed with horror, kept their mugs of beer suspended in the air, as they listened to the footman's thrilling narrative of his discovery of the body. True that Mr. Johnson, the butler, had a select audience in the pantry of men of his own standing, well-qualified judges of a bottle of excellent Madeira, which

he had thought the solemnity of the occasion warranted him in broaching. But the crowd of townspeople, which immediately on the dreadful news being bruited abroad had come surging up from Springside and spread itself round the house, standing at tip-toe to peer over the hedges, staring up at the windows and over the chimney-pots, as though expectant of some revelation from them, eagerly demanding news in feverish whispers, and charging up to the lodge gates to glare at any one going in or out of them, had dispersed. A large portion of it had followed the fly, in which the prisoner and superintendent of police, with two constables on the box, had driven away to the cells in the old Guildhall: followed it with roars of bitter execration and threats of personal violence; for not only had the dead man been well liked in Springside, but the rumour had got abroad that the murderer was his son—his son, who had always been a prodigal, a black sheep, and a castaway, and who had on more than one occasion threatened his father's life.

In the library, everything remained just as at the time of the struggle. The body, by Doctor Chenoweth's direction, had been placed upon the couch, where it lay, the dull outline of the profile and the projecting feet showing under the white sheet, which had been thrown over it. But the overturned table on which the lamp had stood—the lamp itself, bent and broken and surrounded with a thousand particles of shattered glass ; the window curtain torn away from its rings, and hanging over in a ragged festoon ; the book which the dead man had been reading, and which had dropped from his hand when he first caught sight of his assailant—all these mute, inanimate objects lay just as they were at the time of the struggle. There was confusion and chaos, but there was no stain of blood on the carpet, nor anything to indicate the deadly end of the encounter that had taken place; the disorder might have been the result of some drunken frolic, save for the presence of that awful form which lay still and motionless on the couch, over which

hung the pictured semblance of what it once had been in the prime of its life and the days of its glory.

It was by Captain Cleethorpe's orders that the room had been left exactly as they found it, and that the door had been locked, not to be opened until the coroner's jury assembled for the inquest. It was with the greatest difficulty that Riley had been induced to obey these orders. The old soldier-servant pleaded in heart-piercing accents to be allowed to remain by the dead body of the master whom in life he had loved so well and served so faithfully. After his first wild shriek of horror and surprise when he recognised the man whom he had seized, the old man became strangely silent. In answer to the eager inquiries of the bystanders, to whom Gerald was unknown, he was compelled to admit that the young man standing there, closely guarded by two grooms whilst the assistance of the police was being summoned, was indeed Sir Geoffry Heriot's son, but more than this he would not say. He kept his back

studiously turned upon the prisoner, who, deadly white, and quivering in every limb, yet preserved a certain proud appearance, and gazed fearlessly round, and seeming to ignore everything that was going on, knelt by the side of the body, and apostrophised it in simple mournful lamentation. The old man was the last of all to quit the room, and when Mr. Drage gently led him away, he broke from the kind hand that was guiding his tottering footsteps, and rushing to his own chamber, flung himself upon his bed in an agony of grief.

In the dining-room, Captain Cleethorpe and Mr. Drage were seated, one on either side the fire. The fire had been lit for the first time that season, not that the evening was chilly, but rather in the vain hope of doing something to dispel the awful gloom which hung over the entire house ; but the wood was damp, and only a thin smoky tongue of flame flickered fitfully in the grate. With the same hope, the butler had placed wine-glasses upon the table, but they re-

mained untouched. Mr. Drage had evidently been unable to control his emotion, there were traces of tears upon his cheeks; his head was bowed down upon his breast, and from time to time a convulsive sob shook his wasted frame. When Captain Cleethorpe was at rest, he sat biting his nether lip and pulling at the ends of his moustache, but every now and then he would rise from his chair, plunge his hands into his pockets, and wander vaguely up and down the room, occasionally pausing to shrug his shoulders and rub his forehead, and then returning to his seat with the same dazed and puzzled air.

The silence, which had lasted for some time, was broken by the Captain.

'It is of no use,' he said, 'it is perfectly impossible for me to realise what has occurred. There was a time when I was accustomed to look upon death in every shape, and when the excitement of my life was so great, that even an occurrence like this would not have struck me with any great amount of wonderment or dismay. But I am growing old I

suppose, and the quiet time I have had of it down here for the last few years, has had the effect of robbing me of my pluck. I am as nervous and as weak as—'

'As I am—you were going to say,' said the Rector.

'On the contrary,' said Captain Cleethorpe; 'I was perfectly astonished to see how you, in your weak state of health, contrived to have all your senses about you, and to give exactly such orders as should have been given, under the effect of this sudden blow. That poor fellow, Riley, would never have suffered any one else to lead him from the room; and in several other instances your thoughtfulness and presence of mind were invaluable.'

'I, too, am accustomed to death; though, of course, not under such fearful circumstances as these,' said the Rector quietly. 'I have seen more of it recently than you. Perhaps, too, there is something in the fact of my knowing that, notwithstanding the little rally which he made, our poor friend was inevitably doomed;

and Doctor Chenoweth had warned me that his stay with us was probably limited to two hours. But the reaction is upon me now, and I feel myself rapidly giving way.'

'It seems strange,' said Cleethorpe, not heeding the last remark, 'that a man whose lease from nature had so nearly expired should die a violent death!'

'It is by no means certain that such was the case.'

'What do you mean?' asked Cleethorpe, bending forward with astonishment.

'Simply this,' said the Rector, adding quietly, 'don't mind me shuddering; the mere thought of the thing turns me sick. Chenoweth told me that from the cursory examination he had made of the—of the body, he found no indications of violence sufficient to bring about the fatal result.'

'But I myself saw the poor face clotted with blood!' said Captain Cleethorpe.

'True; but this was merely surface blood produced by the blows which had been struck. These blows, Chenoweth thinks, were probably

inflicted by the hand, certainly not by any weapon. There were no wounds from which the blood could have flown; there was a slight discoloration of the neck under the cravat, as though the assassin had attempted to strangle his victim, but Chenoweth has very little doubt that the excitement of the struggle brought on an access of the heart disease under which our poor friend was gradually sinking, and that in fact he died a natural death.'

'Good heavens!' cried Cleethorpe, springing to an upright position from his chair. 'If the doctor proves this on the trial this scoundrel will cheat the gallows!'

Mr. Drage looked up at his companion for a moment, then said, 'I think you will find that the man who made the attack upon Sir Geoffry will still by the law be held liable for his death, even though Doctor Chenoweth's opinions were verified.'

'How on earth do you know anything about the law?' asked Cleethorpe.

'In a strange way,' said the Rector. 'When

I first left college my father was strongly opposed to my taking orders, and when I insisted, vowed he would do nothing for me, so I was left to my own resources; and by the aid of some old City friends, I obtained the chaplaincy of one of the jails, which I held for some time, and where I studied the intricacies and working of the criminal law. A case of this kind came under my notice. A poacher shot a gamekeeper, against whom he had been heard to vow vengeance. It was contended for the defence that the wound was not originally mortal, but that death had been brought about by the bungling manner in which the surgical operation had been performed. At the trial, the judge ruled that even if this were the case, the prisoner was guilty of murder, as it was in consequence of his act that a surgical operation was necessary. And the man was hanged!'

'A good precedent,' said Cleethorpe shortly. 'I hope it will be followed in this instance!'

'Do you really believe that this young man attacked his father?'

'Believe it; how can I disbelieve it? Was he not caught red-handed?'

'Might he not have found himself accidentally on the spot after the attack had been made by somebody else?'

'My dear Rector,' said Captain Cleethorpe, shrugging his shoulders; 'your jail chaplain's experiences, of which you were now speaking, ought to have rendered it evident to you that such an idea, if not an absurdity in itself, is, at all events, little likely to obtain credence. People very seldom find themselves on the "spot" where a murder has been committed, without some previous intention of being there. Besides, it is not supposed that the attack was made with a view to robbery; and who is there in this place, or in Europe, I might almost say, who bore any malice against our poor old friend?'

'But the accused man is his own son,' said the Rector. 'His only son.'

'Exactly,' said Cleethorpe, 'and that's just the worst part of the story. I suppose you don't know any of the circumstances of the

case, but I am well posted up in them. This young fellow some years since was in the Cheddar yeomanry, in which I still hold a commission. In a row, at which I happened to be present, he showed the white feather, and the colonel was compelled to ask his father to remove him. Sir Geoffry gave way to his temper, which at that time was much worse than it has been since you have known him, and, after a frightful scene with his son, told the lad to consider himself dismissed and disinherited. I believe they never met again until this wretched night.'

'Yes,' said the Rector, 'there has been another meeting between them, which Sir Geoffry himself described to me. The young man came down here some weeks ago with certain testimony, which, at his outset in life, he had declared he would obtain. He made his way in the dusk to the library, where Sir Geoffry saw him, and, after a very stormy interview, ordered him from the house.'

'Now, my dear Rector,' said Captain Cleethorpe impetuously, 'can anything look worse

for this young man? On the last occasion of his visit, you say, he made his way in the dusk to the library—exactly what he did to-night! What occasion was there for him to endeavour to see his father again, unless he were prompted by a spirit of revenge, and acted on malice prepense. Besides, there are two other points which I have not yet spoken about, but which I will now lay before you. In the first place, this fellow was lurking about here this morning in a sly, underhanded manner; I know that, for my horse shied at him, and as soon as he recognised me, he pulled his hat over his face and made off as fast as he could. And in the second place, when I mentioned the fact of my having seen him to Mrs. Pickering—ah, you may well sigh, I am afraid this will be an awful blow to that poor dear woman—when I told Mrs. Pickering, whom Sir Geoffry had, I believe, admitted into his fullest confidence, that I had seen this youth, she seemed very much agitated, and implored me to ride back as hard as I could and induce the young man to go away. The

words which she used struck me very much at the time, and I recollect them perfectly. "It is all-important that a meeting between them should be prevented," she said, showing plainly that she anticipated and wished to prevent a collision.'

'She will be able to tell us what she meant and what were her reasons for being thus urgent with you in a very short time now, I hope,' said Mr. Drage.

'I am not quite so clear about that,' said Cleethorpe. 'She must have fallen with terrific force, and Chenoweth is as yet by no means certain that there is not concussion of the brain. What chance can have taken her there just at that moment? I am most anxious to hear her account of all she saw. My own impression is that she must have come suddenly upon the scene, and fainting away with horror, struck her head against the corner of the window as she fell.'

At this moment the butler opened the door and announced Mr. Drew.

Mr. Drew was the senior partner of a firm

of solicitors in large practice at Springside, agents to the principal landed proprietors resident in the neighbourhood, and, as representing the English interest of the leading members of the Indian colony there located, correspondents of many legal practitioners in India, to whose interests a clerk was specially relegated. With criminal business Mr. Drew's firm had little or nothing to do; prosecutions for trespass, poaching, encroachments on right of way, and such-like simple matters, they undertook as part and parcel of their land-agent practice, but all heavier cases they declined. In the present instance, however, Mr. Drew, having been sent for by the Rector, who knew him to have been occasionally employed by Sir Geoffry, made a point of attending in person, the London solicitors for whom Messrs. Drew and Dean acted as agents having specially requested that every attention might be paid to him; and the facts of the case, so far as Mr. Drew could collect them from several distinct and opposing narrations, promised to afford a certain amount of

wholesome civil as well as criminal litigation. Mr. Drew was a tall, white-haired, red-faced old gentleman, of portly presence and pleasing manners. One of his sons was in excellent practice at the parliamentary bar, and the other was a minor canon of Avonmouth Cathedral. His daughter was married to the eldest son of a baronet, and he himself was in receipt of an excellent income, so that he thought himself justified in classing himself with the county aristocracy, and spoke accordingly. The little pomposity noticeable in him in general society was, however, always mitigated when he found himself in company with Captain Cleethorpe, whose sharp caustic hints he was accustomed to speak of as 'the language of the barracks.'

'This is a sad affair, Mr. Drage,' said the lawyer, after the first greeting had been exchanged, 'very sad indeed! A great loss to the county society, poor Sir Geoffry, man of military celebrity, and all that kind of thing. And what a dreadful weapon to place in the hands of the lower orders.'

'Weapon! lower orders! What do you mean, Mr. Drew?'

'Mean, my dear sir! Don't you see that in the desperate Radical times in which we live, anything which gives the lower orders a chance of turning round upon their superiors is eagerly seized by them. There is not a Sunday paper throughout the kingdom that will not put forth flaming placards, "Murder of a Baronet by his Son." Our poor friend was not a baronet, but they don't know the difference, and would not mind if they did, as it makes such a good line in the bills.'

'That Sir Geoffry Heriot is dead, is unfortunately too true,' said Mr. Drage, 'but it has yet to be proved that he was murdered; and when that has been proved, comes the question, by whom?'

'Quite right, my dear sir, right in every particular. Doctor Chenoweth stopped me as I was driving out here, and told me there was some doubt as to the cause of death. But I explained to him the law on that point, which holds that—exactly—you know. Well, then

comes the question of identity; this young man was seized in the room, actually bending over the body. I looked in at the Guildhall as I passed, and the superintendent told me that his shirt-front and hands were stained with blood. What do we want more? Motive! That, oddly enough, I think we shall be able to prove!'

'You don't mean to say that Sir Geoffry ever took you into his confidence, Mr. Drew?' said Cleethorpe, turning upon the lawyer shortly.

'I really don't see why he should not have done so,' retorted the old gentleman. 'The private affairs of some of the oldest and noblest families in this country, sir, are in my keeping; and I have never heard any one accuse me of betrayal of confidence. However, as it happens on this occasion, the information I received was not from Sir Geoffry; indeed, it has only just come to my knowledge. This is not the first visit this young man has paid to his father since Sir Geoffry has resided at Springside.'

'How on earth did you learn that?' said Captain Cleethorpe.

'In a perfectly proper and legitimate manner, you may be sure,' said Mr. Drew, his red face redder than ever with excitement.

'No one questions that for a moment, my dear sir,' said the Rector quietly, 'but it seems odd that you should be aware of a circumstance which is not known in the household.'

'Pardon me,' said Mr. Drew, 'it is known in the household; to two members of it at least. The fact is, my coachman is keeping company, as the lower orders call it, with a girl who is housemaid here. The coachman happened to be in town when the news of the murder arrived, and ran up here with all the rest of the people. Here he saw the girl, who reminded him that some weeks since she had told him, as she was one day passing through the passage, she had heard a loud contention of voices—the one being Sir Geoffry's, the other being that of a stranger—in the library, during which the bell was rung violently; that she

lingered to see the result, and finally saw Sir Geoffry's body-servant, Murphy, or some Irish name, which I cannot exactly recollect, show a young man to the door; that same young man, she said, she had just seen accused of the murder and taken away into custody.'

'That, left uncontradicted, would be an important piece of evidence,' said Mr. Drage.

'It is, indeed!' said Mr. Drew. 'But what do you mean by left uncontradicted? How could it be contradicted?'

'Suppose,' said Mr. Drage, with hesitation, 'suppose it could be proved that Sir Geoffry was sorry for having spoken to his son as he did on that occasion, that he acknowledged the lad's goodness, and mentioned his intention of receiving him back and—'

'My dear sir—my dear sir,' interrupted Mr. Drew, 'you can say all this to me because I know your excellence of heart, and all that sort of thing; but if you were to talk in this way to Messrs. Moss and Moss, of Thavies Inn, London, whom I shall instruct to get up the case, they would laugh

in your face! The idea of talking about proving our poor dear friend's intention. Facts, my dear sir, are what will go down in a case like this—facts, and nothing else!'

'Then you are not going to get up this case yourself, Mr. Drew?' asked the Captain.

'No, I am not, Captain Cleethorpe,' said the old lawyer. 'I have had little or no practice, I am happy to say, in criminal business, and as this is a most important case, I shall instruct Messrs. Moss, who are certainly at the head of that branch of the profession. I telegraphed to them just now, and shall expect one of the partners down by the first train to-morrow morning. He will require to see all the witnesses, and this man Murphy, of whom we have just spoken.'

'You mean Riley, Mr. Drew.'

'Very likely, Captain Cleethorpe. I am not expected to remember the names of the servants of all my clients. However, Mr. Moss will require to see him, and above all Mrs. Pickering.'

'I am sorry to say that Mrs. Pickering

still remains in a state of unconsciousness,' said Mr. Drage.

'That's bad,' said the lawyer; 'let us hope she will be better in the morning. I am very curious to hear what she has to say in this matter. Now, gentlemen, good-night. Mr. Moss will come straight to my office, and I will bring him up here at once.'

Mr. Drew shook hands with the Rector, bowed to Captain Cleethorpe, and took his departure. The other gentlemen were about to follow, when the butler presented himself and said, 'That the young woman, who had been sitting up with Mrs. Pickering, had come to say that the lady had just opened her eyes and mentioned Mr. Drage's name, and hearing that he was in the house, she expressed a wish to see him immediately.'

'I will come at once,' said Mr. Drage, then muttered to himself, 'Now I shall learn the truth in this horrible affair.'

CHAPTER IX.

QUO FATA DUCUNT.

The first bell had rung, and the huge locomotive, just filled, was leisurely backing from the water-tank towards the train to which it was to be coupled, as Philip Vane entered the Springside station. He found his knees trembling under him as he alighted from the fly which he had picked up on the Wheatcroft road, and felt that he should require all the nerve at his command to face the blaze of light and the bustling crowd spread over the platform. He had his return-ticket in his pocket, so that there was no occasion for him to enter the booking-office; but on his arrival he had left his travelling-coat and rugs in the cloak-room, and he deliberated for an instant whether it would not be better to leave them

there rather than undergo the scrutiny of the porter. Suddenly, however, it flashed upon him that he could not recall the contents of his coat-pockets, and that there might be therein some card or memorandum, some envelope of a letter, which might lead to its recognition as his property, and be brought in as testimony of the fact that he had been in Springside on that fearful night. He must fetch them at all risks; and his brandy-flask, which he had emptied in the fly, that must be refilled at the refreshment-stand.

The cloak-room, he was glad to find, was at the other end of the platform, away from the bustle and the glare. He went there, and found it occupied by two men: one a clerk, seated at a high desk at the far end, entering in a huge ledger the names of the articles which the other man, a porter, called out as he sorted them away. The clerk was working under a shaded lamp, and in comparative darkness; but two flaming gas-jets lighted the other portion of the room, one of them immediately above the large, square, open win-

dow at which Philip Vane stood, and handed him his ticket.

'Coat and rug, sir?' said the man in his broad Somersetshire accent. 'There you are, sir.' And he placed the articles on the broad ledge before him. 'Beg your pardon, sir,' he added, pointing down to Philip's hand, outstretched to take them, 'cut your knuckles, I think, sir?'

Philip glanced down at his hand, and saw that the back was stained and rough with blood; he was fully alive to the danger of showing the smallest sign of trepidation at that moment, so, holding his hand towards the gaslight, he examined it coolly, and said, in as careless a tone as he could assume, 'So I have; I could not get down the fly window just now, so broke it with my fist; but I had no idea my hand was cut.'

'Bad thing them splinters of glass under flesh, sir,' said the porter; 'better let me wipe it for you with this damp cloth—'

'No, thanks,' said Philip; 'there is the second bell ringing, and I am off by this train

—much obliged.' And with a friendly nod to the porter, he took up his coat and rug and hurried away. The wheels were just beginning to move as he jumped into an empty first-class carriage, and wrapping himself in his rugs and pulling his travelling-cap over his eyes, tried to compose himself to sleep.

Throughout that journey, however, there was no sleep for Philip Vane. The whirling of the wheels beat into his brain, the scream of the engine sent his heart leaping in his breast, the light from the small stations, flashing through the windows as the train dashed by them, startled him so, that he clutched the elbows of the seat convulsively, and leaned eagerly forward in his endeavour to trace any sign of the diminution of their speed. No, onward and still on they went. He remembered having ascertained that they only halted once—at Swindon—on the entire journey; but what if the discovery had been made? What if Madge had denounced him as the assailant? Would not the news be flashed along the line, and the train be stopped at some intermediate

station in order that he might be arrested? Arrested? Let him fancy himself in that position, and think calmly through the case in all its bearings, in order to decide what course he should pursue.

When the old man recovered from his fit he would be able to describe the details of the assault made upon him, and to declare by whom and for what reason he had been attacked. Then would come out the story of the forgery, and then— Philip Vane trembled from head to foot, as he thought of the punishment which the discovery of his commission of that crime would inevitably bring upon him. Before his mental vision at that moment rose the figure of his wife, and he ground his heel upon the carriage floor and cursed aloud. It was to her he owed all his ill-luck in life. If he had not married her he would have been free to marry Mrs. Bendixen, and Delabole would have had no power to compel him to commit the forgery; if he had not married her there would have been no reason for him to undertake that journey to

Springside, and he would not have been brought into collision with that old man, whom he had been compelled in self-defence to strike. He had struck the old man, and the blood was still upon his hand. He moistened his handkerchief, and as he endeavoured to rub off the dull red mark, there rose, even in his hardened heart, a feeling of shame at having struck one so old, and evidently so ill. 'I could not help it,' he muttered between his teeth, 'he held me like a vice. A man with all that strength left in him won't take long in recovering. It was a mercy that he fainted, and so set me free.'

'Call in the aid of the police; a forger and a scoundrel, eh? That meant Irving's business, plainly. But how did he learn that? Asprey's orders as to the old man's letters and telegrams being kept back must have been disobeyed. Who could have done that? My charming wife again, I firmly believe. What could she be doing in that house? I noticed she had no bonnet on, and seemed quite at home. If she had anything to do with it, this

infernal ill-luck would be fully accounted for. One week more would have done it: would have seen me married and rich, and well out of the reach of the police with whom the old man threatened me, and whom he will certainly set on my track so soon as he recovers. What's this? slacking speed now, without a doubt!' And he rose to his feet and peered anxiously out of the window, as the train ran from the outer darkness in amongst blocks of stationary carriages, solitary engines with the outlines of the stokers standing black and weird against the glowing fires, and finally came to a standstill alongside the platform at Swindon.

Philip Vane started as the door was unlocked and thrown open, but the porter only made the customary announcement of the ten minutes' wait, and passed on. Vane looked round, observing but few passengers, who, for the most part, were hurrying to the refreshment-room. He followed them, drank two small glasses of brandy at the counter and had his flask filled with the same spirit, then

he returned to the carriage. As he was entering he felt himself touched on the shoulder, and, turning round, found at his elbow a guard, who demanded his ticket. They would not stop until they reached Paddington, the guard said, and the gentleman would not be disturbed again.

Another passenger was seated in the compartment, a heavy, middle-aged man, with a sealskin cap and a fur rug. He had already hooked a reading-lamp into the lining of the carriage behind him, and was deep in the folds of an evening paper. So intent was he in his occupation, that he merely looked up for an instant as Philip entered, but shortly after the train had started he dropped the paper on to his knees and emitted a long whistle.

'Do you take any interest in the City, sir?' he asked, looking across at his companion.

'No—why?' was the curt reply.

'Because they are going it there, that's all,' said the man. 'Egg-shells and cards

seem about the materials which commercial houses are made of nowadays, let alone companies limited, which are a pleasant combination of cobwebs and feathers. Two more suspensions announced this morning in the papers, sir. Consols fell three-quarters, and a general feeling of uneasiness prevalent. That'll touch us at Manchester, that will. Know anything of Manchester, sir?'

Philip Vane replied shortly that he knew nothing of Manchester, and the commercial gentleman, thus snubbed, betook himself once more to his newspaper, and when he had sucked it completely dry of all commercial information, he drew forth a fat black-leather pocket-book, by making entries in which, and reading over the entries already made, he beguiled the time until the end of the journey. Meanwhile, Philip Vane had again settled himself into his corner, and was deep in contemplation. The recurrence of the panic in the City, of which he had just heard, was another item against him. He had a vague idea of borrowing money from Delabole, on

the strength of his approaching marriage, and escaping with it to Spain or some other place little infested by Britons, where he could lie *perdu* until he had a chance of making his way to South America. There might be some difficulty in this now, for in this panic Delabole might be hard hit, even though he saw from the newspaper, which he picked up and glanced through, the Terra del Fuegos remained at the price at which he had left them.

As they sped on, innumerable projects arose in Philip Vane's mind, were thought over, put aside for farther cogitation, or summarily dismissed : prominent among all the others came the idea that even when he was denounced as a forger, and when the fact of his former marriage was blazed abroad—two things certain to happen within the next few days, perhaps within the next few hours—even then Mrs. Bendixen might not desert him. She could not be his wife, it is true, but she loved him passionately, with a warmth and devotion unknown to paler, colder natures,

with a hungry fervour which might prompt her to forgive the deception he had practised on her, and to fly with him to some place where they could live together beyond the reach of any of their former acquaintances. Or—for the brandy which Philip Vane had swallowed had but had the effect of clearing his brain and steadying his nerve, and he calculated his chances with such coolness and judgment as though another's fate and not his own were trembling in the balance—or supposing that Mrs. Bendixen in the contest between her position and her nature were to give way to the former, she would still have her money, money over which certain letters addressed by her to him and carefully retained would give him considerable control.

Yes, that was how it must be managed; the game of respectability was played out, the news of the forgery and of his intended bigamy would be promulgated at once, and there was nothing left for him but flight. He would have time enough after his arrival in town to get together his most valuable articles

of property, and to start by an early train or boat to such destination as he might fix upon without his flying visit to London being heard of, and while his servants and people at the office would imagine that he was still absent on a business tour, on which he was known to have started. He would not see Delabole, he would not see any one; the cause of his flight would soon be perfectly apparent, and his enemies might then do their worst. He had sufficient money to take him to a place of safety, and then he would work the oracle with Mrs. Bendixen. Properly managed, his fate would not be such a hard one after all. But what a difference one week, even a few days, might have made! Had Asprey's calculations been fulfilled; had Sir Geoffry died at the time the Doctor predicted, the forgery would not have been discovered; Madge could have been brought to terms; and as Mrs. Bendixen's husband, he, Philip Vane, would have had wealth and position, which were to him the only two things worth living for! As that bitterest thought of all, 'what might

have been,' crossed Philip Vane's mind, he stamped his foot with rage, thereby awaking the commercial gentleman, who, struggling into a sitting posture, and wiping the steam from the carriage window, muttered, 'London at last!' and proceeded to pick up his newspaper and get his travelling rugs together.

London! Now Philip Vane must have his wits about him, and be ready to carry into execution all that he has determined on. The porter who bustles about to get him a cab, eyes him, as he fancies, suspiciously, and he bids the cabman set him down somewhat short of his own house, in order that the address may not be remembered. It is comparatively early, not yet eleven o'clock, and being a bright night the streets are filled with people returning from the more sober entertainments, or the votaries of Saint Monday, who have been keeping their accustomed holiday. When these latter gather together in little chattering knots, as they do at almost every street-corner where there is a public-

house, Philip Vane looks out of the cab-window at them, wondering what they are talking about; whether perchance the news of the assault had already reached town, and whether he might be the subject of their conversation. Some of the small shops, at once newsvendors and tobacconists, which are still open, have the placard bill of the contents of the evening papers exhibited at their doors, and Philip scans these eagerly, but finds in them no cause for fear. As he nears his home in the more aristocratic part of the town, he leaves all the noise and bustle behind him, and when the cab stopped as directed at the corner of the street, there was no one within sight. Philip alighted, and taking his rugs in his hand hurried to the Albany. He thought it would be useless to attempt to shirk the inspection of the gate-porter, but to his delight that functionary had temporarily yielded up his post to a deputy, who, unexcited by the novelty of his position, had dropped off to sleep, so that Philip passed by him and gained his cham-

bers unobserved. As he opened the door with his latch-key, he recollected that he had given his servant a holiday, and he knew that he was not likely to come across any one else, for the men holding chambers in the same block were all out of town, and their housekeepers were only visible in the early morning.

Now then to work. In the outer hall were two or three trunks piled on each other. He selected the largest of these, and dragged it into the middle of the sitting-room; then he paused, undecided as to how he should commence his work of selection. The rooms had been furnished by a leading upholsterer, who had been told to spare no expense, and as is usual with such people, had rendered them very handsome and eminently uninhabitable: wood of the finest grain, velvet of the softest texture, gilding of the brightest sheen were there in abundance, but could not be taken away. They had cost much money and must be left behind. At one time, he had a notion of dismantling the shelves of the clocks, and

the china ornaments, and the valuable nick-nacks which were strewn about them; but on second thought he determined to leave them, fearing they would be missed by his servant on his return, and thus suspicion would be excited. Finally, he dragged the large trunk back into the hall, and fetching the portmanteau which he ordinarily used, commenced filling it with wearing apparel, carefully packing, too, his splendid dressing-case with silver-gilt fittings, and a quantity of plate which he took from an iron safe in his bedroom.

He had opened the door of this safe, and was looking through a number of documents, bills, and other securities with the intention of seeing which could be made available in his flight, when he heard a sudden knock at the door. Not an ordinary knocking—quick, hurried, but studiously low, as though the person knocking were fearful of attracting other observation than that person whose attention he was endeavouring to catch.

Philip Vane paused in his task and listened; his heart beat so loudly that at first he

could not hear anything else, and after the knocking had ceased, but a minute afterwards he heard it distinctly. He filled a wine-glass from a decanter of brandy on the sideboard and swallowed its contents, then he crossed the hall and paused at the outside door.

'Who's there?' he asked, in a low tone.

'I,' replied the well-known voice of Mr. Delabole, pitched in the same key. 'I; let me in at once—most important!'

Vane opened the door, and Mr. Delabole entered. He knew the way, he had been there often before, and with his host following him, he rapidly crossed the little hall and passed into the sitting-room. When he saw the half-filled portmanteau and the room littered with clothes and papers, he started back and turned quickly round.

'Halloa!' he said, 'so soon? I came to warn you, but you seem to have heard of it already.'

'Heard of what?' said Vane, looking bluntly at him.

Mr. Delabole's face was pale; there was a

strained, worn look round his eyes, his usual gorgeous shirt-front was crumpled, and his ring-covered little hands were very dirty; but it was with something of his old jaunty manner that he said, 'Won't do, my dear Philip—things are too serious just now for us to indulge in such gaff. You must have heard the news, or you would not be packing up to cut and run in this way.'

'I have this moment returned to town, and I tell you I have heard no news whatever.'

'Well, then, not to keep you in suspense any farther, the short and long of the matter is this: Late this evening, after business hours, I received a private telegram in cipher from Garcia, the resident engineer at Terra del Fuegos, and—' Mr. Delabole stopped and whistled.

'And—' interrupted Philip Vane, who scarcely had noticed the announcement his companion had to make to him, so great was his relief.

'And,' continued Mr. Delabole, looking

hard at him, 'the water has come into the mine, and it is all U-P.'

'That's a bad business,' said Vane, striving to look interested. 'What do you intend to do?'

'Well, you are a plucked one, Philip, I will say that for you,' said Mr. Delabole, in admiration. 'You take this as coolly as though it were a trifle, instead of meaning ta-ta to every sixpence you have got in the world. To be sure there is Mrs. Bendixen's money in prospect, but one ought never to reckon upon that until one has touched it. And you ask me what I am going to do. I will tell you, my dear Philip, in a word of four letters—bolt!'

'Leave England?'

'Leave England very much indeed, for a short time. I had always arranged with Garcia that when this crisis happened—I knew it was always on the cards, having been told so by old Prothero, when he came back from his second visit and sold all his shares—I had arranged with Garcia to let me have

forty-eight hours' notice before the news could reach the City in the regular way. If he keeps his word, and I have no doubt he will, the interesting occurrence will not get wind until Thursday morning, by which time we—if you decide upon accompanying me—can be the other side the Pyrenees, and well into Spain.'

'Is there absolute necessity for your going?'

'Well, my dear Philip, when the T. D. F. bursts up, there will be rather a howl, and it will probably, too, be better for me to be out of the reach of certain speculative persons who may think they have been defrauded of their money. What an extraordinary fellow you are! You must necessarily make yourself scarce, and yet you seem to be displeased with the notion of my company, which I thought would have afforded you the greatest delight.'

'It is not that, of course; I should be glad of your society, but it's hard lines to have to run away into hiding just now.'

'You can take Mrs. Bendixen with you,

my dear Philip,' said Mr. Delabole sardonically. 'She will not know that it is anything more than a mere commercial smash; and she will be doubly anxious to have the opportunity of concealing her own stricken deer. Besides, you might have had to bolt in a more hurried manner. O, by the way, I have news for you.'

'What news?' said Vane, starting. 'More trouble?'

'On the contrary,' said Delabole, 'good! Just before I came out, Asprey enclosed me this telegram, which he received to-night. Read it for yourself.'

Mr. Delabole took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to his companion, who opened it eagerly, and spread out its contents before him. But he had scarcely glanced at the first word, when, with a heavy groan, he fell senseless on the floor.

Mr. Delabole was a practical man; he rushed into the bedroom, and emerging with the water-jug, dashed a stream over his friend's face; then dropping on his knees be-

side him, untied his neckerchief, unbuttoned his waistcoat and shirt, and lifted up his hand that he might feel how the pulse was beating.

What makes him drop the hand suddenly as though it had been red-hot, letting it fall heavily on the floor? What makes him bend over it again as it lies there doubled up and shapeless, and peer curiously at the cuff and shirt-wristband? What makes him shrink back, regaining his feet with one bound, and looking down with horror on the prostrate form?

'He did it,' he muttered, 'by the Lord! What's this the Doctor says?' picking up the telegram which had fluttered to the ground. '"Chenoweth, Springside, to Asprey, Cavendish-square. Sir G. H. is dead. Killed to-night in a struggle. Particulars by post. Shall want you at the inquest." Killed in a struggle; and unless I am very much mistaken, this is the man that killed him. What's the meaning of his falling into a fit when he read that? What's the meaning of those stains on his hand and cuff and wrist-

band? That was where he was all this day, when he would tell no one where he was going! And here are his boots and trousers still cased with the heavy country mud! What was the meaning of this packing up, which I interrupted him in? his plate and papers too, I see, to take with him. What did that mean but to bolt? This is an infernal bad business,' he continued, dropping into a chair and wiping his forehead. 'I wish to Heavens I had not come here!'

At this moment Philip Vane opened his eyes, and after gazing wearily round him, gradually struggled into a sitting posture.

'Help me to get up, Delabole,' he said, in a faint voice. 'Give me your hand.'

'Not I,' said Mr. Delabole, drawing back and plunging his hands into his pockets.

'What's the matter?' said Philip, still faintly. 'What has happened?'

'This has happened, Philip Vane: that I know where you were during this day and what you did! Henceforth we work separate, and I advise you to keep clear of me. I don't

pretend to be straitlaced; I am not particular as to how I get my money so long as it comes, but I have never gone in for murder yet, and I don't intend. And look here; you know I am sound enough, but if you don't want others, who might not be quite so reliable, to find out what I have found out to-night, look to your coat-cuff, and shirt-wristband, and trousers, and boots, and be off out of this place, before the hue-and-cry is upon you.'

So saying, without another look at his companion, Mr. Delabole put on his hat and strolled from the room, leaving Philip Vane grovelling on the ground.

CHAPTER X.

THE LONDON LAWYER.

The Rector stepped softly into the darkened room, and closing the door behind him advanced towards the bed, and seated himself in a chair by its side. Madge lay with her head propped up by pillows, over which her long brown hair, here and there clotted with a deep dark stain, and damp from the fomentations which had been applied, lay streaming. Her head was turning restlessly from side to side, and a cry of agony, not sharp, not broken, but one low-pitched long-continued wail, in which her acute suffering often expressed itself, broke from her lips. At first she seemed not to notice that any one had entered the room, and it was not until the Rector had first lightly touched her hand,

and then taken it gently between his own, that she ceased moaning, and, calming herself by a great effort, saw her friend seated by her side. Even then she seemed either not to recognise him, or to confound the circumstances under which he was present, for she pressed the hand that was free hard upon her forehead, and closed her eyes again for some moments before she spoke.

Then she said, 'I know now why you are here.'

'You sent for me,' said the Rector, in his gentlest tone; 'you told the servant you wished to see me.'

'Yes,' she said, 'I recollect it all now. My mind is a little confused, I am afraid, and when I first saw you sitting there and holding my hand just as you used to do in the old days when I had the fever, I thought that time had come back again, and wondered whether all the things which have occurred in the interval had been seen by me in a dream. I wish they had, O, how I wish they had!'

'Your strength is not yet sufficiently returned to enable you to think, much less to speak of anything which is certain to excite your brain,' said the Rector, bending over her. 'Margaret,' he added, as if replying to an impatient gesture on her part, 'I must speak plainly to you; your state is most critical, and if you excite yourself, your life, or what is perhaps worse, your reason, is in imminent peril.'

'You mean that I shall go mad?' said Madge, turning her eyes upon him and clutching his hand. 'If I do, it will be from reticence, not from speaking. You have been often pleased to praise my common sense, believe me it has never been more active or more capable of doing me service than at the present moment. I must know from you what has occurred this night; you must tell me all without attempting to suppress or disguise anything. Do you hear me? you must say!'

The Rector hesitated a moment before he said, 'Will you not wait until Dr. Chenoweth,

who is coming up again to-night, has seen and spoken to you?'

'This is no matter for doctor's decision. You, best of all men in the world, can judge how I can bear up against illness and trouble; you alone in the world know the story of my life, and what I have gone through. I tell you I must hear of to-night's occurrence at once and from you!'

The Rector bowed his head. 'If I refuse to answer any question you may put, or stop in the midst of my recital, you will understand, Margaret, that it is solely on your own account.'

'I understand,' she replied; then involuntarily sinking her voice, she asked, 'Sir Geoffry—is he—is he dead?'

'He is.'

As the Rector spoke, he felt a convulsive thrill in the hand that lay within his own, and the pallor of Madge's face grew yet more intense and ghastly, but she evinced no other sign of emotion.

'Tell me all about it,' she murmured.

Again Mr. Drage hesitated, until prompted by a nervous hand clasp. 'When the servants, whose attention had been aroused by the sound of the struggle and the crashing of the overturned furniture and the broken glass, collected their senses sufficiently to rush in a body to the library, they found a man bending over Sir Geoffry's dead body, and endeavouring to raise him from the ground on which it lay to the couch; your presence on the spot was not noticed for some moments, not, indeed, until the man had been secured and removed into the hall.'

'Secured, do you say? Is the man, then, in custody, and is he known?'

'He is; he was recognised by Riley on the instant; by a servant who had seen him on the occasion of the previous visit; finally, by Captain Cleethorpe, who spoke to you about him in the afternoon, when you expressed your dread lest he should come to—'

'Ah, my God!' screamed Madge, supporting herself on both hands, and drawing herself towards him. 'Of whom are you speaking?'

'Of Sir Geoffry's son, George Heriot.'

But at that instant Madge's strength gave way, and she fell prone on her face with outstretched arms, and hands working convulsively.

The Rector gently raised her, and laid her back upon the pillow. He was about to ring the bell to summon assistance, when he saw her eyes open and her lips move.

'Stay,' she murmured, 'for pity's sake. This is now a matter of life and death, which must be talked out at once between you and me alone; don't fear for me, I am strong enough; but I could not let things rest thus, even if I knew that to speak of them would kill me. What proofs are there against this young man?'

'Many and various, and most convincing. Riley, sorely against his will—for he is almost heart-broken at the turn which affairs have taken—will be called upon to prove the original quarrel between the father and son, when Sir Geoffry told him that he had discarded and disowned his son, whose name was never

again to be mentioned in the household. Riley will farther prove that on a recent occasion the young man came to Springside to seek an interview with his father, entered the house at the same time and much in the same manner as he entered it to-night; and that he, Riley, was finally ordered by the General to show George Heriot the door, and never give him admittance again. Cleethorpe, who had some slight acquaintance with young Heriot several years ago, will speak to meeting him in the afternoon, and to the young man's evident desire to avoid recognition; and I should almost think, Margaret, if you are sufficiently recovered, that you will be called upon to state why you were so strongly anxious that a meeting between the two men should be prevented.'

'All these facts that you have alleged will be taken as reasons and motives, probable inducements for him to commit the crime. What proof is there that he did commit it?'

'As circumstantial evidence it can hardly be stronger. He alone is seized upon the spot

immediately after the commission of the crime; the body of the victim is in his arms; his clothes are stained with blood. When you couple this with the enmity known to exist between him and the murdered man, with the fact of his presence at the place from which he had been more than once ejected and warned, with the fact that he evidently shunned discovery and recognition — witness his behaviour to Captain Cleethorpe — however unwilling one may be to believe in the existence of such monstrous guilt, the charge seems to be impossible of refutation.'

'The crime is one which it would have been impossible for George Heriot to have committed.'

'One would think so,' said the Rector, 'but still, sons have been known—'

'It is not as a son that I speak of George Heriot; it is of himself,' cried Madge. 'He it too gentle-hearted, too brave, too noble to injure any human being, much less his father, whom he always held in affection and rever-

ence, notwithstanding the bad treatment he had received.'

'You speak as if you had known this young man, Margaret,' said the Rector inquiringly.

'Then,' said Madge, 'I speak what is the fact. I knew him intimately for two years, saw him constantly, shared his confidence, knew the inmost workings of his mind, and never saw aught that was mean or dishonourable. And he has been arrested for this crime!'

'The evidence was so strong,' said Mr. Drage, 'that it would have been impossible to avoid arresting him, even if the expression of public opinion had not been loud against him.'

'That evidence shall be overthrown; that public opinion turned in his favour!' cried Madge.

'That can only be done by directly proving George Heriot's innocence,' said the Rector. 'And who can do that?'

'I can,' said Madge, 'I, who stood by

powerless, and saw the attack made upon Sir Geoffry, which I was helpless to prevent; and who saw my dear friend and master struggling with a man, whose back was then towards me, but whom I afterwards recognised, when, after Sir Geoffry had fallen prostrate, he ran past me, and hurled me to the ground.'

'And this man was not George Heriot?'

'No, that I can safely and positively swear.'

'Thank God!' said the Rector, reverently raising his hands, 'thank God for that! That our old friend should meet a sudden and a violent death is in itself awful enough, without the horrible idea that he died by his son's hand.'

'What is the first step to be taken that Gerald can be at once set free?'

'Nothing can be done to-night, Margaret,' said the Rector quietly, 'and it is absolutely essential that you should now have thorough quiet, and not move until you have been again seen by the doctor.'

'But am I to lie here while he remains in

prison with this fearful charge still hanging round him; with the belief in his guilt yet universal? O, it is monstrous to think of such a thing! I cannot and will not bear it!'

'Margaret, listen to reason, and bring that plain common sense which we know you possess into play. No informal steps can be taken; all our proceedings henceforward must be taken under legal guidance, and nothing can be done to rescue this unhappy young man from the position in which he is placed, until his public examination.'

'His public examination! Will he have to take his trial in court?'

'He will first be examined before the magistrates, and upon the result of that examination depends whether he will be sent for trial or not; that result, meanwhile, rests upon the quality of the evidence which you will give on his behalf. And you must remember, Margaret, that your evidence will not merely have the effect of clearing George Heriot, but will have the effect of putting the

officers of justice on the track of the actual murderer.'

'What!' cried Madge, starting up in consternation. 'Is that so?'

'Unquestionably. You, in your position, must not merely show that this young man did not commit the deed, but that some one else did. A minute's reflection will show you that George Heriot's innocence cannot be established until some other man is proved to be guilty. Who that other man is, the magistrates will look to you to say.'

Madge fell back on her pillow in a state of collapse. 'I could not do it,' she murmured, 'I could not do it.'

'Could not do it,' repeated the Rector, bending over her in astonishment. 'Do you know what you are saying? You could not, or, rather, you would not give up to justice the name of the atrocious villain, who cruelly murdered a weak and unoffending old man! Margaret, did I hear you aright?'

But still she only murmured, 'I could not do it!'

'Then will it go hard with George Heriot's chance of escape,' said the Rector.

'O, no,' moaned Madge, tossing restlessly on her pillow, 'the magistrates will hear me. He must be saved.'

'Then,' persisted the Rector, 'you must give up the name of the man whom you saw struggling with Sir Geoffry, and by whom you were hurled to the ground.'

But Madge only murmured, 'I could not do it! I could not do it!'

The Rector rose from his chair and began pacing the room.

'Margaret,' he exclaimed, stopping short by the bedside, and again taking her hand, 'do you know the importance of what you are saying, and the effect of the determination you have arrived at? Do you know that this young man's life is in your hands? That according to the weight attaching to the testimony which you may be able to give, he will either be set free or sent to the gibbet? And yet do you hesitate?'

'He shall be set free,' cried Madge,

'my testimony shall fully clear him of the charge.'

'And at the same time that it does so, it must implicate another. That is the point I want to urge upon you; that is the point which you do not seem to see.'

'I see it fully, perfectly, and plainly,' said Madge, 'in all its most horrible significance. O, if you did but know what you are asking me to do, in bidding me give up the name of the real criminal! If you did but know what accusations of heartlessness and wickedness you are bidding me call down upon myself!'

'Stay,' cried the Rector, suddenly again rising from his seat, and clasping her arm with agitated, trembling hand. 'When you first came to this place, the hand of Providence led me to you, that I might be of service to you, a service which you afterwards repaid a hundred-fold by your care of my motherless daughter. Since then we have been thrown constantly together, and you have shown that you believed in my devotion to you by making me the confidant of your

life's history. Is this confidence to be brought suddenly to an end, at this most momentous crisis of your life, or is it to be extended? Speak.'

'I allow all you say,' said Madge. 'I grant that to no one perhaps in the world am I so thoroughly known as to you; but I do not see what you now wish me to do!'

'To let me be to you now still your confidant and adviser. It is impossible for you, you say, to make public the name of this criminal. Can you not tell it to me, that I may consider what, under the circumstances, is best to be done?'

'I cannot, I dare not!'

The Rector reflected for an instant, then with a sudden lighting up of his face, he turned to her suddenly and said: 'Suppose I, too, have my secret in this matter; suppose I, by certain chance, know who committed this crime, and tell the name to you—what then?'

'It is impossible for you to have this information; the secret is known to me alone

on earth,' said Madge, gazing in astonishment at his eagerness.

'Not to you alone!' he cried, bending closer to her and dropping his voice. 'It is known to the murderer—to your husband!'

Madge uttered a short sharp cry. 'How did you learn that?' she whispered.

'No matter how I learned it, so that I know it now, while there is yet time for me to consider what is best to be done. Margaret, you must trust in me and leave all to me now, as you have done before. You know how thoroughly I appreciate the difficulties of your position. You know how sacredly I will guard your name and fame, that this matter in which life, and more than life, are at stake, requires the fullest and calmest consideration.'

Just then the servant, tapping at the door, announced that Doctor Chenoweth had arrived, and was waiting to see Mrs. Pickering. And the Rector took his leave of Madge, promising to be with her early the next day.

During the various phases of sorrow

through which the Reverend Onesiphorus Drage had passed in his lifetime; when his lot was cast amongst felons, who either openly jeered at his ministration, or pretended to believe in it, with a view to the improvement of their position; when the wife of his youth was gradually fading away before his eyes; when he himself was wrestling with temptation, striving to do what he imagined to be his duty towards that dead wife by blotting Madge's image from his mind, he had never spent a night of greater agony than that which he went through after quitting Wheatcroft. Not once throughout the night did he miss hearing the clocks' weary record of the passing hour; and as he lay tossing restlessly on his bed, the difficulties surrounding the case, which he had taken under his charge, seemed to become increased and magnified. How George Heriot was to be saved, except by the sacrifice of Philip Vane, the Rector could find no means to discover; and though Margaret had not absolutely told him the name of the murderer, he had learned it un-

der such circumstances as would render it almost impossible for him to disclose it to the law. Harassed by these two contending emotions—now nearly driven to madness by the reflection that the young man of whom Margaret thought and spoke so highly was lying in prison, accused of an atrocious crime, of which he was wholly innocent; now racked with fear at the idea of being compelled to divulge the secret gleaned from Margaret, whom he so deeply loved—the wretched Rector became thoroughly worn out towards morning, and as the first signs of renewed life were audible in the house, he fell into a deep slumber.

From this he was aroused by a loud knocking at his door, and by his servant's informing him that a gentleman, whose card she had brought with her, was in the study very anxious to see him. Taking the card from the servant's hand, and reading on it, to his intense astonishment, 'Mr. L. Moss, Thavies Inn,' the Rector bade her say that he would be down in a very few minutes, and

immediately plunged into a cold bath which was awaiting him. Much refreshed in body and brain by this proceeding, Mr. Drage on emerging was yet unable to understand the object of Mr. Moss's visit.

'Moss,' he repeated, glancing at the card, 'Moss of Thavies Inn; surely that was the name of the firm of London attorneys, so celebrated for their conduct of criminal business, whom Mr. Drew said he had retained. What on earth has the man come to me for? The last person in the world to give him any information or help, more especially situated as I now am. What on earth can he have come to me for?'

Then Mr. Drage thought that perhaps the best way to obtain this information was to finish dressing himself, and go down and see.

The Rector had not formed much idea of what a London criminal attorney would probably be like, but on entering the study he was certainly astonished at the comparative youth of the gentleman whom he saw before him. Mr. Leopold Moss was a man of ap-

parently not more than thirty years of age, with sharp aquiline profile and keen bright eyes. He was dressed very plainly, wore no jewelry, save a thin strip of gold watch-chain, and, until thoroughly warmed to his work, spoke in a soft voice, and with a certain amount of what was almost diffidence. But, if you inquired amongst those who knew, you would learn that there was no man in the legal profession to be compared to Mr. Leopold Moss in his manner of grasping a subject, or in his method of dealing with its details. In the conduct of certain great legal commercial cases, with the woof of which a strong criminal warp was intermingled, he had held his own against the ablest men at the bar, and even the great Mr. Barnstaple, Q.C., had admitted that nothing was more pleasant than to be instructed by Leopold Moss, nothing more vexatious than to be opposed by him. 'Ah, dear Leopold,' Mr. Barnstaple would remark, 'has not the misfortune to be, like myself, a man of pleasure. He prefers Chitty to Kitty, and Blackstone to

Burgundy, consequently he gives one the most confounded amount of trouble to be prepared for the precedents and opinions which we know he will bring forward against us. Our dear Leopold is an exceptional instance, but great ability is seldom allied to virtue; the latter charming quality more often accompanies stupidity, and the two together form the favourite compound out of which judges are made.'

But although Mr. Leopold Moss, by the exigencies of his profession, was compelled to devote a large portion of his time to study, which in itself possessed a fascination for him, he by no means led the hermit life which Mr. Barnstaple ascribed to him. A knowledge of man was, as he rightly imagined, as useful to him as a knowledge of law, and he went a good deal into society (not amongst those peculiar classes more affected by Mr. Barnstaple), where his strange experiences and conversational powers rendered him a great favourite.

Such was Mr. Leopold Moss. He rose

from his chair as the Rector entered the room, and returning his host's salutation commenced by saying:

'You are doubtless surprised to see me, Mr. Drage, not having had any intimation of my coming. The fact is, I have come down here about that bad business that happened last night, and have called upon you to ask for certain information and advice on behalf of my client Mr. Heriot.'

'Your client Mr. Heriot?' exclaimed the Rector in surprise. 'Why, Mr. Moss, I understood that your firm was instructed to get up the case for the prosecution.'

'It was rather a complicated matter,' said Mr. Moss. 'Mr. Drew, of this place, did telegraph up to instruct our people, but the telegram did not arrive until late in the evening, long after business hours, and was sent on to my house. I was dining out, and found it on my return home, but in the mean time I had engaged myself to act on the other side.'

'How was that? By whom were you retained?'

'It came about in this way. I was dining at the monthly meeting of a little society of antiquaries to which I belong, when Doctor Asprey, the well-known physician, who is one of our members, was summoned from the table. This so frequently happens that it has become a joke against the Doctor, and on his return we were prepared to banter him as usual; but he made his way straight to me, and asked me to come out into the ante-room to talk over a matter of important business. When the door was closed, he told me he had just returned from seeing a Mrs. Entwistle, who appears to be some relative of the accused, and a young lady named Pierrepoint—'

'Good heavens! Rose Pierrepoint,' interrupted the Rector.

'Yes,' said Mr. Moss, 'I think that was the name. At all events, this Miss Pierrepoint is engaged to be married to young Heriot. They were in an awful state of mind; for the superintendent down here, at Heriot's request, had telegraphed to Miss Pierrepoint

the news of the arrest, and the ground of the accusation. Their first thought was to send for Doctor Asprey, who seems to be a kind of *ami de la maison* at Mrs. Entwistle's, and his first thought, after comforting the women, was to hurry back and secure me. I returned with him to Mrs. Entwistle's, and we sat talking long into the night. In the course of the conversation I learned that you had at one time warmly befriended Miss Rose Pierrepoint and her sister, Mrs.—Mrs. Pickering,' he said, referring to some notes, 'who was housekeeper to the late Sir Geoffry; and I determined upon coming down by the first train, which left Paddington at six o'clock, and seeing you before I took any farther steps in the matter. And now, if you will please, tell me, as succinctly as you can, all the facts of which you are in possession, but not stating any impressions which you may have formed.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAW OF EVIDENCE.

The Rector had been talking for more than an hour. What had been sarcastically remarked of him in the pulpit, that 'he lacked the power of compression,' was certainly proved to be true by his attempt at secular narrative. He told the story of George's first quarrel with his father as he had heard it from Sir Geoffry; of the manner in which he had been discarded; of the long period during which he had supported himself; and of the manner in which Sir Geoffry received him on his return. Then Mr. Drage, becoming more circumstantial, repeated what Riley had said, and what Mr. Drew's servant had said about the high words passing between father and son, and the manner in which the old soldier's

servant had been ordered to turn his young master from the house. Upon this followed an account of the conversation held between Sir Geoffry and the Rector, in which the former tried to justify his proceedings, but was, Mr. Drage thought, finally convinced that he had been in the wrong and not disinclined to make reparation. Then came Captain Cleethorpe's meeting with George in the street, in which the latter had betrayed his anxiety to avoid recognition. And the narrative concluded with a description of the arrest of the young man with his father's body in his arms.

The Rector ceased, and Mr. Moss, who had been sitting for the most part with his eyes closed, swaying his body backwards and forwards, and alternately bringing together and separating the tips of his fingers, now and then making a pencil note, now and then elevating his eyebrows, but never in any way showing the slightest sign of interest or surprise, opened his eyes wide, and brought them to bear on his companion. But as he did not

speak the Rector took the initiative, and asked him what he thought of it.

'Well,' said Mr. Moss, contracting his eyelids and speaking very slowly, 'it is a strong case of circumstantial evidence. Young man on the spot, blood on his clothes, the body in his arms; bad feeling known to have existed between him and his father; had been down there once before about the same time in the evening, and knew where to find the old General. All these, neatly pieced together, make a very pretty case for Drew's people, or whoever they may choose to employ. What did he do it for? we should say. What did he get by it? Nothing, they would reply. Don't propose to show that—bad-tempered young man; done in a fit of rage and out of revenge. I wish he hadn't been down to this place before; the first business, of his having been discarded when he was a boy, happened so long ago that all the particulars would probably have been forgotten, and the mere fact alone preserved. But now we get voices in altercation and orderings-out; his knowledge of

where the old General was to be found at that time of the evening, and all the rest of it. Now this Riley,' continued Mr. Moss, referring to his notes, 'this man-servant Riley, as I gather from you, will be an unwilling witness against us? I say "us," Mr. Drage, because though you were a great friend of the late Sir Geoffry, your sympathies are, I presume, with the young man whom I represent?'

'I should endeavour to keep my sympathies, sir, on the side of justice,' said the Rector gravely. 'I could not at the first bring myself to believe that a son of my poor friend, no matter what had been his later surroundings, could have committed such a crime. But I confess my sympathies were not with him until I became convinced of his entire innocence.'

'O,' said Mr. Moss, looking across at him with half-closed eyes; 'you became convinced of his entire innocence—well—well. And now about Riley, Mr. Drage. He is an Irishman, I believe?'

'He is.'

'Was formerly in the army, and has for years been Sir Geoffry's body servant?'

'Exactly. He was passionately attached to his master; but he will not for an instant allow himself to believe that the young man in custody is guilty. He told me he felt that the honour of the family ought to be considered before all things.'

'Does Mr. Drew know what evidence this man can give?'

'O yes; he was talking of it here last night. He will be called upon to prove that the bitter feeling existed between the father and son.'

'And in his endeavour not to prove it, or to prove as little of it as possible, Mr. Riley will make a nice case of it for us,' said Mr. Moss, shaking his head. 'I shouldn't wonder,' he continued, speaking more to himself than to his companion, 'if, when Drew got my telegram, he sent up for Netherton Whiffle or Fairland; and this would be just the sort of fellow to fall into their hands. They would turn him inside out like a glove. Now let me

see,' he added, referring to his notes, 'what else have I to ask about—O, Mrs. Pickering.'

'Well, sir,' said the Rector sharply, 'what of her?'

'Mrs. Pickering,' said Mr. Moss, still at his notes, 'is the sister of Miss Rose Pierrepoint, and was housekeeper to &c. By the way,' he said, turning over a leaf, 'haven't I something about Mrs. Pickering on the spot at the time? Yes, here it is—"Found senseless outside the window, supposed to be suffering under a concussion of the brain." That's awkward—Mrs. Pickering would be a most important witness.'

'She would indeed,' said the Rector.

'Yes,' said Mr. Moss, peering curiously at him with half-shut eyes, 'as you say, she would indeed. By the way, Mr. Drage, you made use of an expression a short time ago which I should like to have a little farther explanation upon. You said that your sympathies were with this young man since you have been convinced of his innocence. That is rather a strong phrase, and one which I, as

his attorney, am of course glad to hear made use of by a gentleman in your position. Now, will you kindly make me acquainted with your grounds for entertaining this conviction?'

Mr. Drage saw that he was in a dangerous position, and that he must be very careful, or Margaret's secret would be discovered. 'I scarcely know,' he stammered—'a sort of general—sort of—

'Exactly,' said Mr. Moss. 'Now you haven't seen the accused since he was taken into custody, I believe?'

'I have not.'

'Then the sources of this conviction cannot have been supplied by him. Very sad thing about this Mrs. Pickering, and concussion of the brain you say. I suppose that she was at once removed to her own room.'

'Certainly, so soon as the first excitement was over.'

'When did the doctor see her last?'

'Late last night, I believe.'

'Have you heard what was the latest report?'

'No, I have not.'

'When did you see her last, Mr. Drage?'

'She sent for me last night, just before the doctor's visit.'

'Sent for you,' said Mr. Moss. 'O, then the concussion of the brain was better?'

'Ye-yes,' said the Rector, growing very hot and uncomfortable.

'Sufficiently better to enable her to talk to you about what had occurred?'

'Yes,' said the Rector, 'I—I think so.'

'It is now,' said Mr. Moss, quietly looking at his watch, 'half-past eleven o'clock; the express for London leaves at twelve twenty-three. Please to tell me, my dear sir, whether I am to return by that express or not?'

'Mr. Moss—' cried the Rector.

'Mr. Drage,' interrupted the gentleman addressed, 'my time is valuable to me and to others; I cannot afford to—pardon the expression—fool it away. You might have spared yourself the whole of the long story you have told me, and all my speculations and inquiries, if you had merely informed me that Mrs.

Pickering had talked with you about last night's occurrence. I now ask you plainly, whether I am to be made acquainted with what Mrs. Pickering has told you or not; if I am not to be so informed, I shall throw up the case and return to London immediately.'

Mr. Drage was silent for a moment, then he said, 'Will it not suffice you to know that she declares George Heriot to be innocent?'

'Not the least in the world,' said Mr. Moss, with the nearest approach to petulance which he had yet shown. 'The only way of establishing the man's innocence without establishing another's guilt is by proving an alibi, which is impossible in this case, where the man is taken on the spot. I tell you plainly, Mr. Drage, I must have no half measures now; my proper course would be to go to Mrs. Pickering and endeavour to get her to tell me the story, but as it has already been told to you, and as she is probably too weak to repeat it with safety to herself, I look to you for it.'

'And if I decline to tell it?' said the Rector.

'If you decline to tell it, I throw up the case and return to town. It will be for the gentleman who replaces me to tell you what will be the probable result.'

'Suppose the information I possess was imparted to me in the strictest confidence,' said the Rector, after some little deliberation. 'What would you say to that?'

'Suppose this innocent man is hanged because his friends declined to come forward and state what they know, what would you say to that?' said Mr. Moss.

'Good heavens, such a thought is too awful; such a miscarriage of justice could never take place!'

'Ten minutes to twelve, Mr. Drage,' said the lawyer, again referring to his watch, 'and it will take me twenty minutes to drive to the station.'

'What am I to do?' cried the Rector. 'This is a matter of the most vital importance. Of course a secret will be safe with you?'

Mr. Moss smiled quietly. 'If you only knew all I know, my dear sir, or had heard

half what I have listened to in my life, you would have no doubt about that.'

'Yes, but even when you know it, you can make no use of it,' said Mr. Drage.

'That is for me to determine,' said the lawyer. 'Come, sir, five minutes more have gone, and it is time for you to decide.'

'Then I will tell you all I know,' said the Rector. 'I am doing it for the best—Heaven grant that I may be right in my judgment.'

'No doubt about that,' said Mr. Moss shortly. 'Now be as brief and as clear as possible, please.'

'This young man, George Heriot,' commenced Mr. Drage, 'was not even present at the time of Sir Geoffry's death. Mrs. Pickering, who had been strolling in the grounds to get some air, heard Sir Geoffry call out in an unusually high tone of voice, and came as quickly as possible to the window. There she found him struggling with a man whose back was towards her. She saw the old man beaten with heavy blows: she saw him fall lifeless under his assailant's grip, but she was power-

less to move or even to call out. Then the man faced round, but seeing her at the window staggered back.'

'Did he recognise her?' asked Mr. Moss.

'He did, and she him; the recognition was mutual. He recovered himself in an instant and dashed through the window, flinging her, who strove to stop him, heavily to the ground.'

'I see,' murmured Mr. Moss, screwing up his eyes and looking into the fire, 'this young Heriot must have come up just afterwards. He had been hiding about in the neighbourhood all day, waiting to see his father; knew where to find him alone about that time, and was coming to make his last appeal. That hooks on all right. Now,' he continued, looking up at the Rector, 'you would have told me all this before, of course, if Mrs. Pickering had not some motive for wishing the real ruffian to remain unknown. I am a man of the world, sir, and obliged to speak plainly when we come to such close quarters. Was he her lover?'

'Sir,' cried Mr. Drage, 'she loathed and despised him!'

'*Cela n'empêche pas*,' muttered Mr. Moss to himself. 'Who was this man, father, brother, or what? He must have been some relation.'

'He was her husband,' said the Rector faintly.

'The deuce he was!' said Mr. Moss, really surprised. 'That looks bad for Pickering. By the way, I heard she was a widow; but it seems that Pickering is not dead.'

'The unhappy lady is not a widow,' said Mr. Drage. 'Her husband is alive; and, as I told you, it was he who committed this fearful crime. But his name is not Pickering.'

'That is excessively probable,' said Mr. Moss. 'Now your dislike to enter into family particulars is quite intelligible; but as I shall have to know this man's name, you may as well tell it me at once. What is it?'

'His name is Vane,' said the Rector, 'Philip Vane.'

Mr. Moss started. 'Not Philip Vane, who

is connected with the Terra del Fuegos Mine?' he asked.

'The same,' said Mr. Drage.

Mr. Moss gave a long low whistle. 'It takes a good deal to surprise me,' he remarked, 'but I confess you have done it.'

'Do you know the man?' asked the Rector.

'Very well,' cried Mr. Moss, 'that is to say, I have met him out at dinner, and have a nodding acquaintance with him. Struck me as being a clever man too, who would be likely to keep out of such a scrape as this. Now, if you please, describe to me the relation between the lady whom we will call Mrs. Pickering and Mr. Vane.'

'He married her years ago, when she was an actress,' said the Rector, with an effort; 'he lived upon her salary until he saw his way to better things, when he deserted her, telling her they should never meet again; that their marriage, known to themselves alone, should be forgotten, and that they were each free to follow their own devices. She has never seen him since they parted until last night.'

'But she has heard of him, of course,' said Mr. Moss—'has heard that he was going to marry the widow of my old friend Bendixen, a woman of large property.'

'She did hear that.'

'And did she take no action?'

'None that he was cognisant of.'

'Very well answered,' said the lawyer. 'You have improved immensely, sir, during this examination. So that it was not to see his wife that Vane came down here?'

'He was not, so far as I believe, even conscious of her presence at Wheatcroft,' said the Rector.

'Then what brought him down here?'

'This is the second time he has been at Wheatcroft. He came before to see Sir Geoffry on business, I believe, but I do not know the details.'

'We can get them from Mrs. Pickering,' said Mr. Moss. 'By her aid I think we shall be able to pull young Heriot out of this fix; but without her, I don't know what we should have done.'

'You will depend, then, greatly on Mrs. Pickering's evidence, Mr. Moss?' asked the Rector, with some hesitation.

'Greatly! Entirely, so far as I see,' said the lawyer.

'Evidence as to what she saw, as to who committed the murder?'

'Undoubtedly! She will be asked who committed it and every particular about it.'

'And suppose she were to refuse to answer?'

'If she refuses to answer she would undoubtedly be committed to prison for contempt of court,' said Mr. Moss. 'But why on earth should she refuse?'

'Because, however badly she has been treated by her husband, she could not bear to be the means of bringing him to a shameful death.'

'I don't want her to be the means of doing anything of the kind,' said Mr. Moss; 'all I want her to do is, to save my client.'

'That is what she is most anxious to do. But I told her it was impossible to prove the

innocence of George Heriot, without giving Philip Vane into the hangman's hands.'

'Dear me, did you indeed!' said Mr. Moss. 'That's a nice round phrase about the hangman's hands; but your tastes, my dear sir, have probably led you to other studies than those of criminal law. Your ideas on that point are apparently very vague.'

'Do you mean to say that Mrs. Pickering could prove George Heriot's innocence without incriminating her husband?'

'Certainly not. She must incriminate him. But what you were talking about was, if you recollect, "the hangman's hands." Let me put it to you plainly. I intend to call Mrs. Pickering, and by a series of questions make her give evidence of the circumstances of the murder. I shall ask her who committed it, and she will have to answer truly, giving her husband's name.'

'She will never do it, she will never do it!' said the Rector. 'Is not that giving him up to death?'

'Not at all, my dear sir. This is just the

critical point where your knowledge of the law breaks down. If the hue-and-cry is sent after Mr. Philip Vane, and he is taken and brought to justice, the lady whom we call Mrs. Pickering could not be examined for or against him, *inasmuch as the wife of an accused is not a competent witness to be examined for the prosecution or the defence.*'

'Is that so?' asked the Rector.

'That is very much so,' said Mr. Moss, 'as many of my clients have learned to their great delight. You seem yet a little dazed; now listen to me, and I will make it perfectly plain. If you committed a murder and I were accused, your wife could be examined on my behalf, and could give evidence like any ordinary witness, and subject to the same penalties, *and she could prove you committed it*; but if in consequence of her evidence you were accused, she could not be examined.'

'Then George Heriot will be acquitted, and Philip Vane left to find his punishment in the torture of his conscience.'

'Then from what I know of Mr. Vane, he

will get off very lightly. However, what you mean is this, that he will not suffer at the hands of the law. I should say, certainly not; his wife, so far as I can see at present, is the only witness against him, and her mouth is sealed.'

'Thank Heaven for that!' said the Rector faintly.

'I have heard several eminent criminals equally grateful,' said Mr. Moss, 'though they expressed themselves in different language. I will now go down to the Guildhall, and have a talk with this young man; this conversation with you enables me to take good news to him, but I have a letter in my pocket which I expect he will like better than anything I could say.'

'And I will go to Mrs. Pickering,' said Mr. Drage, 'happy in being able to relieve her mind of that fearful anxiety which I know now besets it. You will not go up till the evening train now, Mr. Moss, and I hope you will dine here before you leave.'

Mr. Moss agreed, and the gentlemen separated.

The name and fame of Messrs. Moss and Moss, of Thavies Inn, were known in every assize town in the kingdom; and though Mr. Leopold Moss but rarely left London, where he was always in request, his personal appearance was known to the old superintendent of the county police in charge of the Guildhall at Springside, who, on occasional visits to the Old Bailey, for recognition purposes, had had the famous criminal lawyer pointed out to him. Consequently Mr. Moss, when he asked to see the prisoner who had been brought in on the previous night on a charge of murder, was received with courtesy, and waited upon by the superintendent himself.

'A bad case this, sir,' said the old man, as he led the lawyer along the corridor; 'looks bad on the face of it, though by no means conclusive in my own mind.'

'Glad to hear you say so,' said Mr. Moss;

'being retained for the defence, I may say I am of the same mind. By the way, have any of your people gone to look at the state of the premises?—I mean inside the grounds, broken paling, bent twigs, footmarks, and so on.'

'I sent two of my smartest men first thing this morning, sir, and they have been at it ever since, for they have not come back yet.'

'Right,' said Mr. Moss, 'I knew you would not omit anything of that kind. Let me see, when did I see you last?'

'At the C. C. C., last January twelve months.'

'When you came to prove former convictions against Thornhill, the bigamist — wasn't it?'

'It was, sir,' said the old man. 'I am proud to think you should have recollected it. But what a memory you must have!'

'Well, yes,' said Mr. Moss diffidently. 'You see, I find it useful occasionally. O, this is the place!'

'Yes,' said the superintendent, whispering

as he unlocked the door, 'Having known poor Sir Geoffry, and having my own views on the subject, I put him in here instead of one of the ordinary cells.'

The room in which Mr. Moss found himself was long and low, the windows were heavily barred, and there was no furniture beyond a chair and a table. George Heriot, who had been resting his head on his arms, roused himself at the noise of the opening door, and stared with astonishment at his visitor, who advanced and put out his hand to him.

'You do not know me, Mr. Heriot,' said the stranger. 'I am Mr. Leopold Moss, of the firm of Moss and Moss, solicitors, London, and I have been retained for your defence.'

'Retained for my defence! By whom, sir?'

'By a very charming young lady, who instructed me to deliver to you this letter, and your aunt. Read away, Mr. Heriot, don't mind me. I understand the circumstances, and can wait.'

When George Heriot replaced the letter in his pocket, his cheeks were burning. 'She at least does not believe in my guilt,' he said.

'Of course not; no more do I,' said Mr. Moss. 'I should not have shaken hands with you, if I had the smallest doubt about it in my own mind. Ours is not too cleanly a profession, and I see a great many odd phases of life; but when I have to do business with a scamp, I always hold it to be enough to attend to his business without shaking hands with him.'

'I am afraid you have a very difficult task before you, Mr. Moss,' said the young man. 'I was completely dazed last night, and even now I have scarcely recovered the power of thinking. But from the little use I can make of my muddled brain, I perceive that the case is fearfully strong against me.'

'It looked so to me at first,' said Mr. Moss; 'but I have received some information since I came down here, which, though I am anything but a sanguine man, makes me look

forward to effecting your release very speedily, I should say on the first, or at worst, the adjourned examination. There can be no pretence for sending the case for trial.'

The news was almost too much for George, who, in his excitement, clutched hold nervously of Mr. Moss's arm, and said, 'Thank God for that! Can you tell me what has happened, and what you have heard?'

'Not now,' said Mr. Moss kindly, gently pushing him into the chair. 'You are not strong enough to hear the story, and I have yet some of the detail to work up before it would be proper for me to tell to you. But I may say that you will owe your rescue to a lady, and one who, I hope, will very shortly be related to you. I mean Mrs. Pickering.'

'Related to me—Mrs. Pickering—I never heard the name!'

'Never heard the name, my good sir! The excitement has indeed upset you. I mean Mrs. Pickering, the housekeeper at Wheatcroft, sister of Rose Pierrepoint.'

'Rose's sister? What! Madge?'

'I shouldn't wonder,' said Mr. Moss. 'She was an actress once; and on the way in which she plays her part at the examination, rests your chances of speedy release.

The mid-day train, by which the London morning newspapers arrived at Springside, brought down with it three well-dressed, jolly-looking gentlemen, of portly appearance and pleasant manners. They began to smoke and laugh and tell each other stories of common friends as the train left Paddington, and they were still in the height of their enjoyment when it arrived at Springside. After they alighted they went to the best hotel, and had an excellent luncheon. Having ordered dinner and bedrooms, they sallied forth into different quarters of the town.

Mr. Leopold Moss, walking up from the Guildhall to the rectory to fulfil his dinner appointment with Mr. Drage, saw one of these gentlemen swaggering jauntily down the other side of the street, and exchanged with him a pleasant salutation.

'Ah,' said Mr. Moss to himself, 'Gottover here already. Those *Mercury* people are certainly smart to have sent him down so soon. That must be Streeter, too, talking to the flyman; and Wogg coming down the Wheatcroft road. This is going to be a big case, or at all events these celebrated specials will make it appear so.'

And before going to the rectory, Mr. Leopold Moss telegraphed to the firm, that unless particularly wanted, he should make Springside his quarters for the next two or three days.

CHAPTER XII.

CORNERED.

Things were very bad indeed in the City. Discount was almost as impossible as credit, and the number of iron safes that were pointed at as containing securities, sir, worth five-and-twenty thousand pounds, upon which, I give you my word, I cannot raise five hundred,' was incredible. The City correspondents of the various journals were unanimous in stating that the money market had a 'downward tendency.' Consols were lower than they had been within ten years; French rentes were nowhere; and at the Turkish and Egyptian scrip, in which a good deal of light and innocent gambling had recently taken place, men shook their heads ominously. The sensation of the week had been the collapse of the Great

Discount Company, which two years before had been formed, on the limited-liability principle, out of the old-fashioned house of Reddie and Wryneaux, a firm whose word was at any time good for a million. Whether old Mr. Reddie quietly withdrew all his money as soon as the new company was in working order, instead of leaving it in, as he promised; whether young Mr. Wryneaux not merely drew out his own money, but a great quantity belonging to other people; whether it was through simple mismanagement or base fraud, no one knew, but the company came to a smash, and hundreds of families were plunged into ruin.

Then the panic began in earnest. When people unconnected with the City heard that the great house of Reddie and Wryneaux (no one ever spoke of the company) had failed, they almost began to doubt the stability of the Bank of England. Everybody wanted to withdraw everything from anywhere where it might be deposited. There were 'runs' on private banks which had stood the test of the

various influences on the money-market during a century, and which now nobly responded to the call; the partners sitting in conclave in the private parlour, and calmly smiling at the eagerness of the mad crowd of customers, who were waving their cheques at the counter. All the telegraph clerks in the country were sending off messages commencing with the words 'Sell at once,' and the stock-brokers were nearly worried out of their lives by the multiplicity of the commissions thus forced upon them.

In this state of affairs one would have imagined that the shareholders and others interested in the success of the Terra del Fuegos Mine would have felt some little disquietude; doubtless they did; but any of them taking the trouble to make a journey into the City would have had their speculations speedily set at rest, for the forty-eight hours' notice which Garcia had guaranteed to his principals had expired, and on arriving at the office the next morning the gentlemanly clerks found on the closed shutters a document, in Mr.

Gillman's remarkably neat penmanship, informing the world that 'business was temporarily suspended,' and referring inquisitive applicants to some accountants' office close by. The gentlemanly clerks were not very much surprised at what they learned; they had been to a certain extent behind the scenes, and were always anticipating some catastrophe; they knew moreover that when the panic was ended they would have little difficulty in getting as good and more reliable situations, and turned away in tolerable happiness to enjoy their unwonted holiday.

Not so the public, who came down with a swoop directly the news got wind, and hung about the doors, and read the written placard over and over again, and consulted with each other in the hopes of hitting upon some method of regaining a portion of the money, out of which, as they one and all fiercely declared, they had been swindled. Some of them were weak enough to go off to the accountants' office indicated on the placard, where they found themselves confronted by two very

pert clerks, who told them all they knew of the business was, that the books of the company had been handed over to them for inspection, and that a report would be issued as soon as the necessary investigation had been made; they denied all personal knowledge of the directors or officers of the company, and said, as was the truth, that was the first time in which their firm had ever been employed in any matters relating to the Terra del Fuegos Mine. So the public departed in a crest-fallen condition from the accountants' chambers, and went back and loafed about in front of the offices again, deriving some feeble comfort from talking to fresh-comers, and explaining to them the hopeless state of the investment in which they had a common interest.

But the other directors, who, whatever doubt they may have felt as to the continuance of the prosperity of the company, had risked their capital not merely for the sake of the high interest which it produced, but with the firm conviction, that long before the

first rumblings of the approaching earthquake were generally felt, they would have such warning as would enable them to withdraw their ventures in safety, were wild with rage and disappointment. How the news had spread, in what mysterious fashion the fiery cross had been sent round, no one could tell; but by twelve o'clock several of the men, whose names had been prominent on the direction of the Terra del Fuegos Mine, were met together in the board-room of the Friendly Grasp Insurance Office, the use of which had been temporarily accorded to them by the actuary, to whom most of them were personally known. There was Lord Ballabrophy, red-headed, red-bearded, and red-faced, chuckling, stammering, and uttering interjectional oaths, but yet with a certain air of breeding about him which did not fail to tell, even on his excited colleagues; there was the Honourable Pounce Dossetor, for the first time since his marriage with Miss Swank grateful that her trustees had invested her money in the product of a capital income, and left him only a

few thousands to fool away; there was Sir Cannock Chase, not attending much to what was going on, but busied in reading a report from his steward, hinting at the existence of more coal on his Staffordshire property; and there, too, were Mr. Bolckoff and Mr. Parkinson, who, beyond all others, were savage at the turn which affairs had taken—the former sat at the long board-table, white with rage and silent, apparently immersed in certain calculations which he was making on the sheet of blotting-paper before him, while the latter strode up and down the room, speaking now to one man then to another, and from time to time using such language as his vicar never could have expected would have issued from the lips of that meek and virtuous churchwarden.

'Well, gentlemen,' at last said Sir Cannock Chase, having finished the steward's report, and deriving some gleam of satisfaction therefrom, 'it is of no use wasting any more time in these desultory discussions; the question is, can anything be done? If so, let us

decide what it is to be; if not, let us clear out of this, as I imagine we all of us have plenty of other things to attend to.'

'We must put a bold face on the matter,' said Mr. Dossetor, whose stake was small and whose income was good; 'we must stand to our guns.'

'Shtand to our gons!' cried Mr. Bolckoff, looking off the blotting-paper, and taking his dirty fingers out of his mouth and waving them in the air. 'How can I shtand to my gon mitout de ten thousand pounds von vhich I have been robt?'

'Then your gun was—he, he—a ten thousand pounder, Bolckoff?' chuckled Lord Ballabrophy.

'Vere is de Chairman? vere is de General Manager?' cried Mr. Bolckoff, with more gesticulation.

'If you knew that, Mr. Bolckoff,' said Mr. Dossetor, 'you might have a chance of getting back a portion of your ten thousand pounds. Mr. Parkinson, you seem to have taken the trouble to make inquiries in this matter; there

is no doubt, I suppose, that Delabole and Vane have levanted?'

'About Delabole not the slightest in the world,' hissed Parkinson from between his gleaming teeth. 'I went round to his rooms in Piccadilly this morning, directly I heard this news. The hall-porter at the Chambers told me that Mr. Delabole had gone away in a cab last night, taking two portmanteaus with him. He took no servants, but went alone. The cabman was directed to drive to King's Cross, but that was, of course, merely a blind; no doubt by this time,' snarled Mr. Parkinson, dashing his hand upon the mantelpiece against which he was leaning, 'he is safe across the Channel, with our plunder in his trunk.'

'Do you think he has carried off much?' asked Sir Cannock Chase.

'Everything that he could lay his hands on,' replied Parkinson.

Mr. Bolckoff uttered a loud groan and buried his dirty fingers in his stubbly gray hair.

'When I say everything,' said Parkinson, not heeding the interruption, 'I mean everything that is at the same time valuable and portable. His rooms, for I made an excuse to go up there to write a letter, are in much their usual state, and on inquiry at his stables, I found that his brougham and horses are still there; though we shall doubtless discover that they have been made away with for their full value. But, by what I learn from two or three brokers who were employed by him, he must have sold out every scrap he held in every company with which he was connected, and realised the lot.'

'But if auf der Continent man muss den Polizei telegraphiren und hef ihm cote and sent back,' said Mr. Bolckoff, nodding his head vehemently.

'Ah, to be sure!' said Lord Ballabrophy, 'one could send after him—he, he—Pollaky, don't you know? and that sort of thing.'

'Do you imagine,' said Mr. Parkinson quietly, 'that it would be politic in us to invite legal interference in our affairs? I will

put it as delicately as possible, but don't you think that in any investigation which might take place, certain revelations might be made—as, for instance, to the allotment and manipulation of shares—which might be more amusing to the outside public than to ourselves? Don't you think we had better leave it to that outside public, who are pretty well certain to make a stir in the matter? Mr. Delabole is one of the cleverest of men, and would be the less scrupulous if provoked. Don't you think we had better leave him alone?'

'Certainly, most decidedly,' said Sir Cannock Chase, adding in muttered tones, as he looked across the table at Mr. Bolckoff, 'Dam stoopid foreigner!' With both of which sentiments the company assembled seemed generally to agree.

But Mr. Bolckoff was not to be put down by clamour. 'But of Fane,' he cried, 'you have told me nichts of Fane!'

'Mr. Vane left London three days ago,' said Parkinson. 'It was stated at the last board meeting that he required a few days'

absence, and so far everything was regular. It was understood that he was going into the country on business connected with his marriage.'

'Ach Gott! dat will now be durchgefallen,' cried Mr. Bolckoff. 'Ven Fane had made die Pendixen seiner frau, then could I my lost money have picked out of her fortune.'

'That's a contingency that is now scarcely likely to occur, Mr. Bolckoff,' said Parkinson. 'When Vane hears the news of the smash here, he will doubtless postpone his marriage until he has settled his affairs in such a way as to render Mrs. Bendixen's fortune unavailable by his creditors. I went to his rooms too, but I found he had not been back since he originally started. It is probable therefore that, confidential as were the relations between him and the Chairman, our friend Mr. Delabole kept him in ignorance of the impending smash.'

When Philip Vane found that Sir Geoffry Heriot, whom he had hitherto looked upon

as likely to recover speedily from the attack made upon him, was actually dead, when the sudden thought shot through his brain that he was a murderer, the shock was too much for him ; and, as we have seen, he fell senseless, coming to himself only to find that his crime was shrewdly suspected by Delabole, and to hear the few short bitter phrases in which his quondam accomplice severed the connection between them, and expressed his horror at the deed which had been committed. Raising himself on his arm, Vane made an impotent attempt to delay Mr. Delabole's departure, to implore him to be silent and secret, and to listen to such feeble explanation as could be offered; but his voice failed him, and ere he could renew the effort, he heard the slamming of the door, and knew that he was alone.

Alone! and yet not alone. Rising to his feet and staggering to a chair, Philip Vane saw before him the pallid cheeks and blood-stained features of the old man; saw the eyes closing and the thin wiry figure slipping

from his grasp; heard again the moan, the last sound he had heard in that accursed place. He tried to shut it all out from him, but it rose persistently before his view. He started from his seat and attempted to proceed with the packing of his portmanteau, but found himself ever and anon pausing in the midst of his work, and recalling some incident or occurrence of the previous twenty-four hours. The mud on his trousers and boots, which Delabole had noticed—he must have got that in crossing the plantation and the lawn. The lawn! He sprang up in guilty terror as he reflected that, with the coming morning light, the track of his footmarks across the lawn would be revealed. The boots and trousers must be destroyed; he would take them with him in his flight, and get rid of them on the first opportunity. In his flight! whither was that flight to be directed? His plans must be all changed now; the necessity for immediate escape was infinitely more urgent than it had been before, and the chances of obtaining funds less possible. He

had relied on obtaining a temporary loan from Delabole, but that, of course, was no longer to be thought of, and the funds which he had at command were barely sufficient for his immediate wants.

Nevertheless he must fly, and at once. The dawning light showed him that a new day had begun ; before the end of which the murder would probably have been fully discussed; all evidence possible to bear upon it duly sifted ; suspicion rightly or wrongly directed, and all the machinery of justice for the detection and the arrest of the criminal set in motion. The problem of his fate would be solved by the next four-and-twenty hours; if before they had passed away he could contrive—following the route indicated by Delabole—to be well on the road to Bordeaux, with Spain, his ultimate destination, almost within his reach, he was saved. If not—What is that noise in his ears, as of tumbling table and smashing glass? There it all floats before him again; the book-covered walls, the large easy-chair, the shaded lamp, and the fragile

figure with the blood-stained brow. Will it never cease to haunt him? It fades—it has gone!

Now he can bring himself once more to think what steps it is absolutely necessary he should take at once. Money; he must have money; and he must divest his mind of all this unreal fantasy, which from time to time surges up into it; he must shut out that horrible vision, which from time to time unmans him, and must make use of that common sense on which he has hitherto relied, and which has never yet failed him when anything of real importance was to be brought about. Money, where to get money for his immediate want, that must be his first determination. Now if he were only confident of his power over Mrs. Bendixen, the course was clear. The time at which a clue to the identification of Sir Geoffry's murderer might be given, would depend entirely on Madge; and if he judged her rightly, he was tolerably safe in her hands. The recollection of the tie still existing between them; the remembrance of

the old days, which now seemed so far distant, and which he knew—for his wife had often told him so—were surrounded by a halo of romance in her eyes; more than all, as he thought, her horror while denouncing the murderer, to have at the same time to proclaim him as her husband—for all these reasons her lips would be sealed. No one could tell whether, in the hurry and confusion, she had recognised the man who had sprung past her and hurled her to the ground; and from what he knew of Madge, she was just the woman to avail herself of such a plea as this, and to leave the direction of suspicion to other circumstances. There was no other evidence which he need fear, save Madge. His visit to Springside was entirely unknown, and the fact of the proximate smashing-up of the Terra del Fuegos Mining Company, just announced to him by Delabole, instead of being, as it would have been at any other time, a source of rage and lamentation, was regarded by him as rather advantageous than otherwise, inasmuch as it provided a suffi-

cient excuse for the immediate flight which was absolutely necessary.

Now as to his power over Mrs. Bendixen. From what he knew, he believed it to be sufficient to induce her to brave all the frowns of society and to run away with him, provided only he had sufficient excuse for asking her to consent to such a step. That excuse again he finds in the ruin of the mine. If he could only see her, it would not be difficult to tell her a previously planned story, in which he could represent himself as the victim of misplaced confidence in Delabole, and by which her sympathies could be aroused. That once done, the rest was tolerably easy. He knew Mrs. Bendixen's jealous, passionate nature, and had little doubt about being able to mould it to his will; but to achieve that result he must see her, and there was the difficulty. But one idea occurred to him. He must leave town at once by the very first train which would take him to Dover, and there was no reason why she should not come to him there, and give him an interview before he started

for France. If he could induce her to do this, he relied upon himself for carrying out all that he desired.

He finished packing his portmanteau, in which he placed the trousers and boots which he had worn on the previous evening, and wrapping his dressing-gown round him, seated himself at the writing-table. Instantly, between him and the paper which he placed before him, rose the dread figure of the old man as he had last been seen in life, and it required all Vane's nerve to keep himself in the chair and stolidly and doggedly go through his appointed task. Even then his writing was weak and trailing, and nothing like his ordinary firm round hand; he noticed this, but thought it not inconsistent with the anxiety under which he had explained to his correspondent he was suffering, and which induced him to implore her to come to Dover by the first train after the receipt of the note, and to meet him on the pier. When he had sealed this letter, he walked to the window and threw open the shutters. It was already

morning; the outlines of the opposite houses stood out gray and dim in the early light, and the black London sparrows were twittering blithely on the covered way. He had ascertained that the first train for Dover left soon after six, and had made up his mind to go by that. One starting a little later, it is true would have reached Dover soon after; but Vane's chief anxiety was to be out of London; and though he might linger on the road, he would be tolerably safe from recognition. Looking at his watch, he found that he would not have too much time to get to the station; and after a little deliberation as to whether he should or should not enlist the services of the gate porter to carry his portmanteau, he determined to do so, and walking out, roused that functionary from his slumbers, and brought him to the rooms. The man seemed half asleep, but brightened up sufficiently to drink a glass of spirits which Vane presented to him, and then bore off the portmanteau on his shoulders. The one cab which was making the Piccadilly pavement echo with its

horse's feet was then secured, and in it Vane drove off to the railway.

When he arrived at the station he alighted from the cab, but before dismissing the driver he handed him the letter which he had written to Mrs. Bendixen, and giving a handsome gratuity, bade him take it at once to its address. He was hurrying into the booking-office, when he found the way temporarily blocked by a little procession of men, who were conveying huge bundles of newspapers from the ponderous red vans in which they had arrived, to the starting train. The newspapers! He had forgotten them. By this time the story of the murder must have arrived in town, and these newspapers were about to spread it broadcast through the country and the world; what was known about it, what was conjectured, it was all important that he should know, and yet he felt half afraid to satisfy himself.

He took his ticket, and made his way through the crowd of passengers—who were mostly of the poorer class, for the train was tardy and cheap—to the bookstall. The bun-

dles of newspapers had already arrived there, and the smart young men behind the counter were opening and sorting them and slapping them down with refreshing vigour. As Vane approached, he saw one of these young men select two or three contents-placards from one of the bundles, and after shaking them out and perusing them himself, proceed to hang them up in front of the counter. 'Murder at Springside'—there it was in large type, it caught Philip Vane's eyes instantly. He saw nothing else; the rest of the bill was a blank to him. 'Murder at Springside'—why were the letters printed in red, why—Steady! Now his head was reeling, and unless he could put more control over himself he was lost.

He steadied himself with an effort, walked to the stall and purchased a newspaper, which he placed in his pocket, and hurried to the train. There was no difficulty in securing a first-class carriage to himself, and bidding the guard lock the door, he threw himself into one of the farthest seats, and drawing his travelling cap over his eyes, buried his face

in the upturned collar of his coat, and did not move until the train was fairly in motion; then he took the paper from his pocket, shook it open with trembling hands, and soon read as follows:

'*Murder at Springside (by telegraph). Sir Geoffry Heriot, K.C.B., was murdered last night at his residence, Wheatcroft, near this city. The person apprehended and charged with the commission of the crime is a discarded son of the deceased gentleman, who, it is stated, has been heard to vow vengeance on his father. Circumstantial evidence against him is very strong. Greatest excitement prevails in the city and the neighbourhood.*'

'My luck again!' cried Vane, bringing his hand down upon the arm of the carriage. 'The arrest of this man gives me another twenty-four hours to the good, and when I have once seen Esther, and arranged with her to join me abroad, I may snap my fingers at them. "The person apprehended and charged with the commission of the crime;"

by Jove, then, Madge must be loyal to me after all, or she would have denounced me at once, and never have allowed this man—whoever he may be—to be taken into custody.'

He threw the paper down, and for the rest of the journey remained buried in thought. The train loitered along, stopping at every little station, where porters came up and roared unintelligibly, where jolly Kentish yeomen, and red-cheeked Kentish lasses, looked in through the window at the solitary traveller, muffled in his wraps, who never looked up or took heed of aught that was passing around him. Now Folkestone, and then glimpses of the sea, calm and smooth and placid as a lake, with the sun, a great red globe of fire, shining down upon it. Now Dover, and Philip Vane has his portmanteau taken to the cloak-room; for he has been reflecting during the journey, and decided, as he cannot cross over till the night boat, and as it is essential that he should not be seen at the Lord Warden, or any other of the places in the town where he is known, he

must loiter about until the time for his interview with Mrs. Bendixen on the pier, and afterwards get some refreshment at a third-rate tavern.

Three hours at least must elapse before Mrs. Bendixen could arrive at Dover, even if she rose immediately on the receipt of her letter, and started by the next train: three long hours to be gotten through somehow. Under other circumstances he could have employed them well enough; he could have found friends staying at the hotels, could have watched the arrival and departure of the boats, or amused himself in a thousand ways. But now he must keep out of the chance of observation, and notwithstanding the comparative security which he felt since reading the newspaper paragraph, that horrible scene kept ever rising before his mind. He walked out to River — a pretty little village in the neighbourhood, which he recollected having visited with a pleasant party years before. Back into Dover, and on to the heights, whence he saw a light thin vapour, like a

filmy veil, rise from the surface of the sea, and gradually approach the town, which it finally enwrapped, completely hiding it from his view. Back into the town again, where the streets were tolerably empty, the promenaders having been driven in by the damp mist. There was a small knot, however, collected before a window in the High-street. Philip Vane, looking up, saw that it was a newspaper office, and that the people were reading copies of the latest telegrams, written on flimsy paper, and stuck in the window. There were two or three slips side by side; mechanically he ran his eye over them—the state of the money-market and the price of stocks, the dissolution of the Spanish Cortes, the resignation of the Austrian Premier, the verdict and damages in a breach-of-promise case. What is this on the last sheet, which evidently has the greatest attraction for the bystanders? Philip Vane pushes among them and reads:

'*The Springside Murder. Strong rumours are prevalent of testimony conclusive as to the*

innocence of accused. Mr. L. Moss is here, engaged for the defence. The housekeeper has recovered, and will give evidence.'

As Philip Vane's eyes lighted on these last words, the writing became indistinct; he reeled heavily to one side, and would have fallen, but for the strong arm of a friendly boatman, who caught hold of him, propped him up, and asked him what was the matter. Philip Vane muttered something—that he was not well, that the mist had affected him.

'No harm in that, master,' said the boatman, 'it is but a sea fog; gets down your throat and makes all damp and uncomfortable, but no real harm in it. Coming on thick though now, ain't it? Won't be able to see your hands before your face soon—getting pitch dark, that it is; and yet belike three mile out at sea it is as clear as noon-day.'

'Let us clear it out of our throats with a dram,' said Vane, for he felt the necessity of some such support; and he and the boatman went into the nearest tavern, and swallowed each a glass of brandy.

When they came out the boatman bade his companion good-day, avowing that the darkness of the fog had spoiled any chance of his getting a job, and that he should go home; while Vane made his way towards the pier. In the broad open space before him, just by the commencement of the pier, the air was lighter, and it seemed as though the mist were clearing off; this effect, however, was but momentary, and as Vane ascended the steps a black mass of vapour, thicker and denser than ever, came stealing silently from the sea like a moving wall.

The half-dozen promenaders, who had been tempted out again by the momentary gleam of sunshine, and were now hurrying back, gazed with curiosity at the man about to face such weather, and some of the young ladies tittered as Philip passed. Blacker and blacker still. He heard the rough voice of the coast-guardsman addressing him as 'mate,' and bid him be careful how he stepped, but he could not distinguish his frame. Below him he heard the voices of two or three sailors in the

steamer alongside the pier, and he could just make out the outline of her paddle-box and her funnel; still he pressed on.

'The housekeeper has recovered, and will give evidence.' That must be Madge, he thought, that must be the position she was filling at Wheatcroft, that was how she was brought into frequent communication with Drage, the parson. 'Would recover and give evidence.' Recover! then she must have been ill, or hurt, or frightened, and that was how the dead man's son had been given into custody unknown to her. 'Would give evidence!' That, connected with the rumours of testimony to establish the innocence of the accused, means that Madge will state what she saw, and give the name of the man whom she recognised as the murderer. No time to be lost, then. This interview with Esther Bendixen once rightly settled—What's that? a huge block of stone, an iron crane, a windlass and—gently now, this must be the end of the pier where the works are yet in progress. Dark just here; let him creep along the side

of the wall, let him—The next instant he had caught his foot and stumbled, and was fighting with the calm placid water below. He was a swimmer, and coming to the surface again, had but little fear; three strokes brought him to the great wall of masonry sunk in the sea, but it was cold and smooth, and slippery with shining weed which broke away under his hands. No chance for hand-hold or foot-hold either, no power of seeing aught more than half-dozen feet in front of him. He shouted, but his voice fell flat and muffled on the heavy air, and he knew that his shouts could not be heard. He struggled again, but he was overweighted with his clothes, and his strength was failing. Let him keep his head now and make one more trial; again the cold smooth wall and the trailing, yielding seaweed; then a conviction of the impossibility to fight much more, a few struggles, and one piercing cry.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT LAST.

Two months have elapsed since the date of the proceedings last recorded, and the newspapers, for lack of something more exciting, have begun to chronicle the movements of the barometer, and the prospects of a severe winter. If, however, throughout England the climate were as it is in Torquay this bright sunny morning, the weather prophets would be considerably out in their calculations, and the disappointment of the school-boys and the cutlers, who were looking forward to a three weeks' skating season, would be intense. For here the air is soft and balmy, the sun bright and hot—so hot, that the gentleman toiling slowly up the hill stops just opposite the club, and unbuttons his long greatcoat, and

lifts his hat to let the sea-breeze cool his forehead. Then, reinvigorated, he proceeds, though his step is still slow, and his breathing somewhat laboured; his destination is, however, close at hand. Through the trim and pretty garden he approaches a villa, perched on a green mound and overhanging the sea, and a young lady, who has been apparently watching for his arrival from the window, meets him at the hall with outstretched hands, and with a face bright with pleasure.

'You are come at last, Mr. Drage,' she said.

'You may be certain I came as soon as I could,' said the Rector, bending down and kissing her forehead; 'but it took some time to settle my father's affairs, and put matters in train for disposing of his share of the business to his partner. However, all that required my personal superintendence is now at an end, and I have escaped from London. And Margaret?'

'Still progressing slowly but surely. You will find her greatly changed in appearance,

dear Mr. Drage; she is still very weak and very thin, but she has improved wonderfully since she came to this place, and day by day we see a happy difference in her.'

'You told me in your letter that she had made no allusion to anything that occurred during that dreadful time.'

'Nor has she up to this moment. She is perfectly tranquil, and apparently not unhappy, speaks frequently of Gerald, and seems anxious that we should be married as soon as possible; but sometimes she will lie for hours without speaking, and when I steal quietly up to her, I find the traces of tears upon her cheeks.'

'Poor dear Margaret! She knows I am coming?'

'O, yes; and has been expecting you very anxiously. If you like, I will take you to her now.'

Mr. Drage left his hat and coat in the pretty little hall, where this conversation took place, and followed Rose Pierrepoint into the drawing-room. On a couch before the win-

dow overlooking the sea lay Madge, looking very pale and very delicate, but, as the Rector thought, wonderfully beautiful, looking, as the Rector also thought, more like a pictured saint than a human being, with her long brown hair hanging over her shoulders, and her white hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes were closed, and she did not open them until Rose said, 'Madge darling, here is our best friend;' then she looked up, and a bright burning flush overspread her face as she partially raised herself on one arm, and stretched out the other hand. The Rector took the hand and lifted it to his lips, dropping into the easy-chair placed by the sofa as Rose left the room.

Margaret was the first to speak.

'Do you find me much changed?' she said.

'No,' said the Rector brightly, 'nothing like so much as I had anticipated. You have had a serious illness, and you are still very weak, but your eyes are bright and your voice is clear, as it was in the old days.'

'The old days,' echoed Madge, 'how far off they seem! part and parcel of another life almost, so indistinct are they to me. Do you know that up to this hour my ideas of what happened at that fearful time are dim and blurred? Do you know that I have asked no one, not even Gerald, not even Rose, for any details of those events? Do you know why I have been so silent?'

The Rector bent his head.

'Because,' she continued, 'I was waiting for you, to whom I have given my utmost confidence, to tell me all that occurred. I could not trust myself to talk on the subject with them; I can with you.'

'Margaret,' said the Rector gently, 'you have just allowed that you are still very weak; don't you think that any conversation of this kind had better be postponed—'

'Not for one moment,' she said; 'I am strong enough to hear anything, and shall merely be restive and uneasy until I know how much of what is constantly recurring in my mind is true, and how much false. Tell

me, then, at once. I remember nothing after fainting in the court. Stay,' she added, seeing him hesitate; 'you fear to distress me. But I already know that Philip Vane is dead. Did he die by his own hand?'

'That is not positively known,' said the Rector; 'but it is believed that he accidentally fell from the pier at Dover. The body was found two days afterwards off St. Margaret's, and was recognised as that of a man who had left a portmanteau in the cloak-room at the railway. On being opened, the portmanteau was found to contain a shirt with blood-stained wristbands, and heavily-mudded trousers and boots; the latter corresponding exactly with the footmarks on the Wheatcroft lawn. Farther inquiry proved that he had been in Springside on that dreadful day, having actually called at my house and spoken to my servant; and all these circumstances, corroborated with your evidence, left no doubt on the minds of the magistrates, who discharged Mr. Heriot; while the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of wilful murder

against Philip Vane. You are distressed, Margaret, I had better stop?'

'No; pray go on. And Gerald was liberated at once?'

'Not merely liberated, but became the idol of the hour. The revulsion of popular feeling was extraordinary. Nothing however, not even his restoration to Rose's arms, I think, gave him so much joy as my discovery of a letter amongst poor Sir Geoffry's papers, written two days before his death—a letter addressed to George, in which he confessed his harsh treatment of him, and implored his return to his position and his home. You are crying, Margaret?'

'They are tears of joy, dear friend. I had no idea that letter had been written, though Sir Geoffry had spoken of his intention of writing it. Thank God he lived to carry that intention into effect. And Gerald —George—is now happy?'

'Intensely happy. I know not which is the happier, he or Rose. Your illness has been the only blot on their felicity.'

'I suppose they will be married at once?' asked Madge.

'Now that you are convalescent, there is no occasion for any farther delay. Sir Geoffry died intestate, and Gerald is consequently sole heir. He is going to sell Wheatcroft, and, for some time at least, travel abroad. So soon as you are able to bear the fatigue of the journey, they will be married and start.'

'Did they purpose taking me with them?'

'They did; they have talked of it often. George Heriot was only speaking to me about it two days ago in London.'

'I shall relieve them of that responsibility,' said Madge, with a smile; 'they shall have no querulous invalid to destroy the happiness of their bridal tour.'

'And what will you do, Margaret?'

'Wait till I am a little stronger, and then seek for some new situation.'

A sharp expression of pain passed across the Rector's face.

'Margaret,' he said, bending over her couch, 'months ago I asked you to become

my wife. There was an obstacle then, and you refused—that obstacle no longer exists. Since then I have seen you surrounded by dangers and difficulties and trials of no ordinary kind, and in them all your goodness and your purity have been triumphant, and rendered you more than ever dear to me. Margaret, I ask you once again ; for pity's sake, do not give me the same reply.'

'I—I could not go back to Springside,' she said.

'Nor is there any occasion for it, dearest one. By my father's death, I am rendered more than rich. The physician, whom I consulted in London, spoke to me words of hope, more cheering than I could have imagined; he told me that, by wintering in a warm climate, my life may yet be prolonged to the ordinary span. It is for you to give me an interest in that life, Margaret. What will you do?'

'I would give my life to save yours,' she whispered. 'I will devote half of mine to tending yours.'

She raised her eyes to his, and in them he saw the dawn of life and hope.

'My darling, my own!'

Mr. Delabole's friends at the board of the extinct Terra del Fuegos Silver Mining Company did him injustice in suggesting that he had intended to mislead by giving King's Cross as the address to the cabman. He proceeded to that station; thence to Peterborough; thence, per Great Eastern Railway, to Harwich; and thence per steamer to Rotterdam. Remaining on the Continent a few months, and baffling all attempts to track him, he finally made his way to Havre, and then took ship for America. Mr. Delabole, being possessed of a large sum of money and great business talents, found admirable scope for financing operations in the United States; and is now one of the leading lights of Wall Street.

Mrs. Bendixen never received the letter which Philip Vane addressed to her on the morning of his flight, and knew nothing of

her intended husband's crimes and fate until she read of both in a newspaper. The shock sobered her for a time, and she disappeared from society. There are rumours, however, that she has seen sufficient of the charms of solitude, and intends reappearing this season with an addition to her establishment, in the person of a husband—a German tenor of military appearance and a flute-like voice.

George Heriot and Rose have their home in Florence, the artistic society of which pleasantest of cities delights both of them.

Last autumn, while the Triennial Musical Festival was being held at Wexeter, a lady suddenly detached herself from a large party, which was crossing the cathedral yard, and running up to old Miss Cave, who was standing looking on in admiration, seized her by both hands and kissed her on the cheek. They had a short but animated conversation, then the lady hurried off to rejoin her friends.

'More friends among the quality, Susan?'

said Sam Cave, as he bustled up to her. 'Who was that lady just now—the bishop's wife or the new dean's daughter?'

'Neither one nor the other, Sam,' said old Miss Cave, half laughing, half crying. 'You have seen that lady often before. She is staying at the Deanery now with her husband, who is a clergyman; but you recollect her when she was our leading lady, and was called Madge Pierrepoint.'

THE END.

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